

# 2021 OPEN SPACE & RECREATION PLAN WESTMINSTER, MASSACHUSETTS



Prepared by the Open Space & Recreation Plan Update Ad Hoc Committee

# TOWN OF WESTMINSTER

## 2021 OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN

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## SECTION 1 – PLAN SUMMARY

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The Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) is a comprehensive planning document that assesses the adequacy of existing open lands and recreation facilities, determines what types of land and facilities are needed and where they should be located, and establishes an action plan for land acquisition, land management, and recreation programming to guide Town agencies for the next seven years. The overall goal of the OSRP is to retain the character of Westminister by establishing a diverse system of interconnected open space areas and to provide quality recreation programs for all residents of Westminister to enjoy, keeping pace with a rapidly growing community. The OSRP recognizes that Westminister is a desirable community primarily because of its scenic, natural, and historic resources. These are the characteristics that the OSRP strives to protect.

The primary sections of the OSRP are as follows:

- Section 2 describes the planning process used to prepare this document.
- Section 3 contains information on the community setting including: regional context, historic data, demographics, and development patterns.
- Section 4 contains details on the environmental characteristics of the Town.
- Section 5 presents an inventory of all conservation and Town-owned land
- Section 6 presents the overall community vision and where open space and recreation fits into the larger picture.
- Section 7 presents an analysis of needs derived from the Master Plan citizen survey of 2012 questionnaire, several public workshops held for the preparation of this plan, demographic data, and state and federal recreation standards.
- Section 8 presents the Town’s specific goals and objectives for open space and recreation.
- Lastly, Section 9 presents the Town’s seven-year action plan that lists specific projects relating to open space and recreation, and lists the municipal entities responsible for implementation.

Westminister’s population has grown significantly over the last fifty years, and more growth is on the way. According to the Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) Build-Out Analysis prepared by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) in 2001, Westminister’s population could increase by as many as 15,000 new residents if the Town were to be fully built out using the zoning standards in place back in 2001. Since this time, the Town has gained approximately 760 new residents. The building activity of the last few years is slightly above the pace of activity happening right before the Great Recession of 2008, with over 50 new homes built in both 2018 and 2019.

Clearly, if the citizens of Westminster cherish the rural quality and character of their Town, they have choices to make. How much open space do they want to purchase to maintain the feeling of openness? What are the costs of such purchases? Is acquisition the only option?

There are several tools that can be used to protect land. Informing large land owners of Chapter 61, 61A, or 61B, preferential taxation for open land, may protect land on a temporary basis, however, such designations are not permanent. Other options for keeping land open are Conservation Restrictions and Agricultural Preservation Restrictions. Educating land owners about the tax advantages of these programs is an important component of the town's open space planning strategy.

Another alternative to outright acquisition is partial development. Some owners might want to sell open land. In this case, they may be willing to subdivide a few lots for development while preserving the remainder of the parcel by deeding it to a land trust or the Conservation Commission.

A third option for keeping land open is through regulations. The Town has had a residential cluster development bylaw on the books for over twenty years and the bylaw was revised in 2017 to allow cluster developments By Right instead of Special Permit. Through this bylaw, houses can be built on smaller lots in order to preserve contiguous common open land. Westminster has had several housing developments built under the cluster housing bylaw, with the Village at Old Mill and the Woods of Westminster being two prime examples. Such a development does not increase the overall density, but it allows houses to be placed on the land in a different way. Protecting the natural resources of Westminster goes hand in hand with the retention of Town character and the feeling of openness. The loss of resources is directly proportionate to the increase in developed land. Land consumption in Westminster has been dramatic over the past 40 years, where the population has increased by 49% since 1980. Much of this increase in population has come primarily from new single-family homes on previously undeveloped land. This development has put pressure on the natural resources and will continue to do so as more open land is converted.

The Town realizes that it does not have the financial resources to purchase all of the privately owned undeveloped land that it would like to acquire for open space/ recreational purposes. The purpose of this Plan is to identify the most important parcels of land to preserve; and to use land acquisition in concert with other land preservation techniques to meet the Town's open space goals. The primary open space goals for the next seven years are to use traditional and innovative techniques for protecting additional open space, keeping pace with development as follows:

- Protect, conserve and enhance “working landscapes”.
- Protect and preserve the Town's cultural resources.
- Provide a broad range of recreation opportunities for all age groups.
- Identify and prioritize lands for acquisition.
- Increase public awareness of open space and recreation resources.
- Increase communication and coordination between the Town and its residents.



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## SECTION 2 - INTRODUCTION

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### A. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The first iteration of an Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) for the Town of Westminster was prepared by Charles Caron and Susan Brown entitled: “Town of Westminster, Massachusetts – Open Space and Recreation Plan 1999-2004.” The Town updated its OSRP again in 2007 and then added two years to Action Plan in 2009, extending the OSRP’s validity with the State into early 2014 when the Plan was updated again as part of the Town's Master Planning process. The Town's current Plan is valid with the State through April 2021.

Since the Town’s last complete update of its OSRP in 2014, the Town has added several key open space parcels to its inventory. Using several methods including purchase, conservation easements, gifts, the Forest Legacy Program, and land protected through the Town’s cluster development bylaw, the Town has been able to permanently protect approximately 89 acres of land since 2014. These efforts have resulted in protecting the remaining shoreline for Muddy Pond (72 acres) and adding 17 acres to Hager Park. The Board of Selectmen has also acquired approximately a dozen parcels through tax title, some of which may be transferred to the Conservation Commission at a later date.

Additionally, the Town established a conservation fund for future open space purchases, and has been depositing \$1,000 annually into this account for the past ten years.

*Table 1 – Open Space Acquisitions 2014-2020*

MAP	LOT	ADDRESS	OWNER	AREA
18	11	141 Bragg Hill Road	CONSERVATION	72
49	3	Worcester Road	HAGER PARK	17
		TOTAL		89

The North County Land Trust is a private/non-profit conservation organization that serves as an advisor to the Westminster Open Space Committee. The Land Trust has worked on several conservation projects on the Town’s behalf, including the Forest Legacy Program and the Midstate Trail Project.

### B. PLANNING PROCESS AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Open Space and Recreation Plan is considered to be part of the Town’s Master Plan, serving as two of the chapters required by MGL Chapter 41, Section 81D: the Natural & Cultural Resources Chapter and the Open Space & Recreation Chapter. The Master Plan was completed in 2014, and also contains chapters on such topics as transportation, town government, housing, economic development, land use and zoning.

This update of the Town's OSRP was prepared by an ad-hoc committee comprised of representatives from the following entities: Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Open Space Committee, Parks & Recreation Board, Agricultural Commission, Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee and the Midstate Trail Association, along with three interested citizens.

As part of preparing this OSRP update, two public forums were held: one an in-person forum (pre-registration required) held on October 20, 2020 to discuss the Town's open space and recreation goals, and a second on-line ZOOM forum held on March 1, 2021 to present a draft of the plan to the public. A citizen survey was also prepared and made available on-line and in paper form. For both of the public forums and the citizen survey, the following means of advertising were employed:

E-Alerts sent to every household that has signed up for this service

Websites

- Town website: front page, Planning Board & Open Space Committee pages

Community Bulletin Boards

- Town Hall
- Library
- Westminster Pharmacy
- Vincent's General Store

Television

- Local cable station – text notice to run intermittently

Announcements

- Board of Selectmen meetings (televised)
- Planning Board meetings
- Agricultural Commission meetings

Other

- Word of mouth
- Flyer distributed to Village Center businesses

A draft of this Open Space and Recreation Plan was distributed to the Board of Selectmen, the Planning Board, the Conservation Commission, Hager Park Commission, Crocker Pond Committee, the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Historical Commission, the Agricultural Commission, and MRPC, the regional planning agency. The final draft will incorporate the comments from the above entities.



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## SECTION 3 - COMMUNITY SETTING

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### A. REGIONAL CONTEXT

Westminster is located in the Montachusett Region of north central Massachusetts, 6 miles west of Fitchburg, 24 miles north of Worcester, 53 miles northwest of Boston and 198 miles from New York City. (See Regional Context Map) The total area of the Town is 37.3 square miles (35.51 square miles in land area). Westminster is bordered by Ashburnham to the north, Fitchburg and Leominster to the east, Princeton and Hubbardston to the south, and Gardner to the west.

Major highways that traverse Westminster include state Route 2 (a major east/west corridor) and state Route 140. Other state numbered routes that pass through Westminster include Route 12, Route 2A and Route 31. The Pan Am Railway line (freight rail) parallels Route 2 and provides access to the network of intermodal facilities servicing central and eastern Massachusetts.

The Town shares several public resources with its neighbors. Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical High School (known locally as “Monty Tech”) is shared with several other communities in the region, but its recreational fields are located in Westminster. Ashburnham and Westminster have joined together as the Ashburnham-Westminster Regional School District for all grades (K-12). The Oakmont Regional High School and Overlook Middle School are located in Ashburnham, while Westminster maintains its own elementary school in the Town Center. Portions of Westminster receive municipal sewer and water service from the City of Fitchburg, and both Meetinghouse Pond and Mare Meadow Pond in Westminster serve as water supply sources for the Fitchburg municipal water system.

Westminster plays host to several regional recreational facilities: Wachusett Mountain State Reservation and Leominster State Forest. The Reservation is shared by the Towns of Westminster and Princeton. Wachusett Mountain contains a total of approximately 2,250 acres of which 605 acres lies in Westminster. The Ski Area actually leases a large chunk of land (450 acres) from the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). The Ski Area has six lifts, 20 trails, and a base lodge (located solely in Westminster). Mount Wachusett contains approximately 300 acres of Administrative Old Growth Forest (defined as those forests that have not been logged within the last 150 years), which is situated in the Town of Westminster and neighboring Town of Princeton. Also of note is the Great Wolf Lodge just off of Route 31 over the border in Fitchburg. This indoor water/amusement park has been in operation since 2016 and draws visitors from all over the New England region.

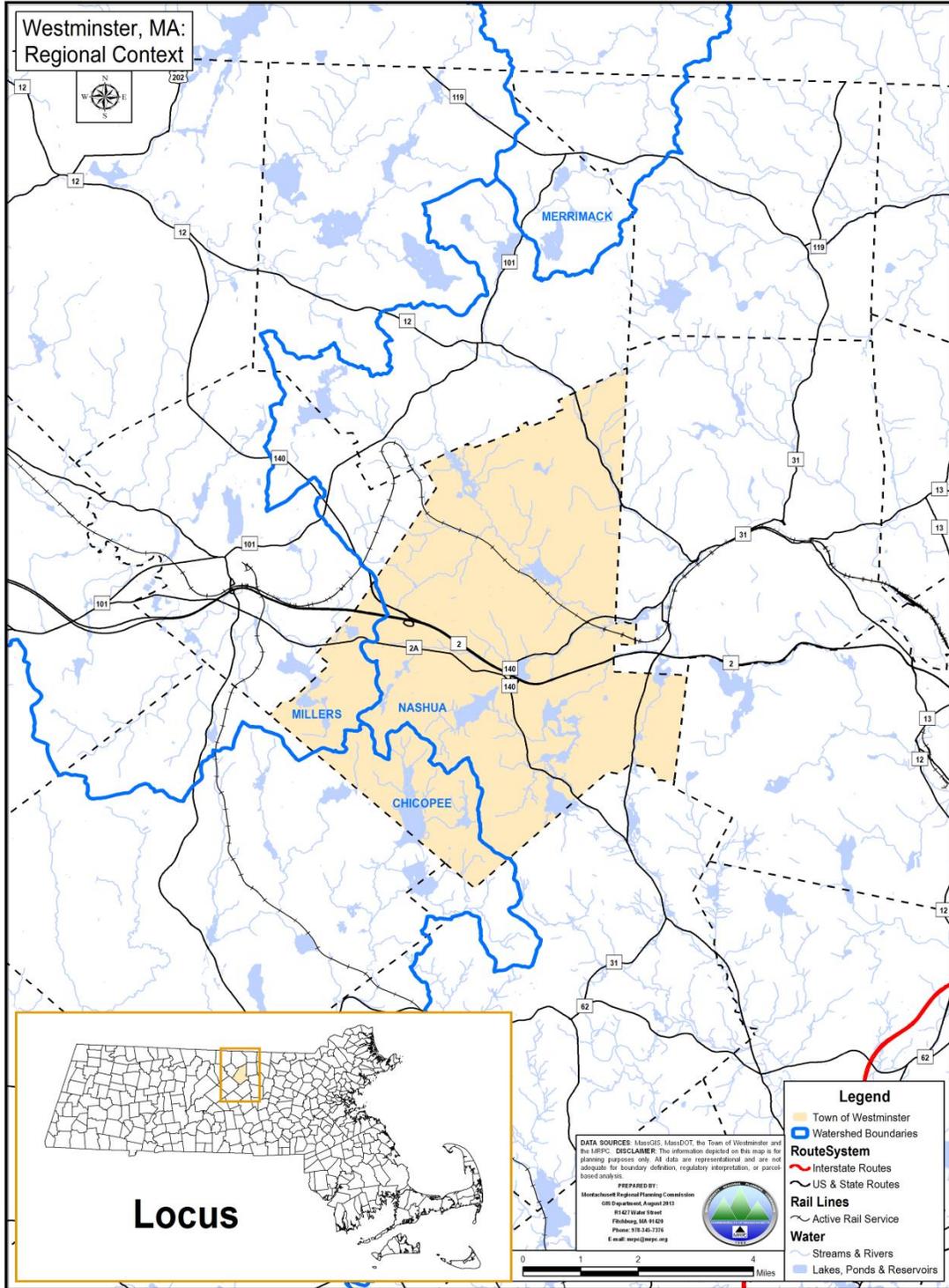
Wachusett Mountain is also a popular location for hiking trails, some of which originate in Westminster. The trails are used for various nature education programs; bird watching, including hawk watching in September; cycling; and horseback riding. The Wachusett Mountain Ski Area also plays host to a number of community events, such as: charity road races, music concerts, auto and food festivals, sky-rides and other similar activities. In the past several years, over two million people have visited Wachusett Mountain State Reservation.

Leominster State Forest can be accessed from and is partially within the boundaries of Westminster. Its 4,300 acres, 1,237 of which are located in Westminster, provides miles of hiking, bicycling and equestrian trails, as well as rock climbing cliffs and numerous fishing sources. Leominster State Forest Headquarters is located within Westminster. Near its western perimeter on Route 31 the Department of Conservation and Recreation has developed a 150' sandy swimming beach, a 2-acre picnic grove, a parking area, an information kiosk, and sanitary facilities. Leominster State Forest is also popular for cross country skiing and snowshoeing.

The Midstate Trail, a 92-mile regional hiking trail extending from Rhode Island through central Massachusetts and connecting to the Wapack Trail in New Hampshire, runs through Westminster. The trail connects Mount Wachusett in Westminster and Mount Watatic in Ashburnham.



Westminster is part of the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC), which serves 22 communities in Northern Worcester County. MRPC meets monthly to discuss issues of common interest. MRPC provides a forum for discussing regional open space issues and opportunities and has recently rendered assistance in the formation of a regional trails coalition for the Montachusett Region. This updated OSRP is consistent with the regional open space plan prepared by MRPC, which advocates preserving: “a network of open space including critical environmental areas, unique landscape features, rights-of-way with scenic or recreational potential and areas required to fill regional open space and recreational needs.”



## B. HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY

In pre-colonization times the area of Westminster was the seasonal home to a branch of Native Americans known as the Nipmucks. This central upland area lured the native people as well as the English settlers with its bountiful resources, natural beauty and strategic location.

The area was designated as “Narragansett No. 2” and granted as payment in 1676 to families of soldiers who fought in the King Phillip’s War. In 1737, Captain Fairbanks Moore built the town’s first permanent structure on the shores of Meetinghouse Pond. By 1759, nearly sixty families had settled within the boundaries of the newly incorporated district of Westminster.

Westminster was incorporated as a town in 1759, but the community was not accepted as a town until 1770. With the completion of the Fifth Massachusetts Turnpike (which became Route 2-A), then Route 2 in 1779, and the Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad in 1848, Westminster had the prerequisites to become a thriving farming and industrial community.

Industries and their surrounding villages grew up around the lakes and rivers where water supplied power to mills. Early industries in Westminster included grist mills, chair manufacturing, paper and textile mills, brick making, cabinet making, coopering and the baking of bread and crackers.

Because of the Town Center’s elevation (nearly 1,000 feet above sea level) the Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad decided to route the tracks to the north of town away from the established business district. Westminster Center continued to be the government and trade center. In its early stage of settlement private wells and springs provided adequate water supply for the townspeople and businesses.



The population decreased from its peak in 1850 so that there were only about 1,500 residents in 1915. In the 20th century the industry all over Town declined. Yet despite the decline and, with the exception of the Westminster Cracker Company which continued to 1970, the population continued to increase. During this time, residences were constructed along the existing roadways and along the shores of Wyman Pond in lakeside cottages. The population soared to over 5,000 in 1980. In the 1980’s a number of new residential subdivisions were created,

adding to the housing boom. Development also continued along existing public ways. The 2010 Census counted 7,277 residents for Westminster.

### C. POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

It is essential to understand the size and composition of the population to plan for the Town’s open space and recreation needs. Between 2000 and 2018, Westminster added 758 residents, growing from 6,907 residents in 2000 to 7,665 residents in 2018, an increase of 10.8%. This is a much slower rate of growth from the previous two decades (1980 to 2000), when the population increased by 1,768 people or 34%. Thus, Westminster’s growth rate appears to be slowing down. This may sound counterintuitive when one considers that the number of Building Permits issued now exceeds pre-recession levels (an average of 50 Building Permits issued during the last three years), but the Town's rate of population growth is indeed slowing down from its peak. With the Town comprised of 37.3 square miles and having a population of 7,665 residents, this yields a population density figure of 205.5 persons per square mile.

*Table 2 - Population of Westminster 1970 – 2018*

						Estimate	Projected	1990-2018 %	2000-2018 %
Community	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2018	2030	Change	Change
<b>Westminster</b>	<b>4,273</b>	<b>5,139</b>	<b>6,191</b>	<b>6,907</b>	<b>7,277</b>	<b>7,665</b>	<b>7,607</b>	<b>23.8%</b>	<b>10.8%</b>

Sources: 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010 US Censuses, 2018 ACS 5-Year Estimates (Table DP05), and MassDOT's Socio-Economic Projections for 2020 Regional Transportation Plans.

*Table 3 - Household Income*

Political Subdivision	Median Household Income (2000)	Median Household Income (2010)	Median Household Income (2018)	Percent Change: 2000 to 2010	Percent Change: 2010 to 2018
<b>Westminster</b>	<b>\$57,755</b>	<b>\$78,632</b>	<b>\$98,714</b>	<b>36.1%</b>	<b>25.5%</b>
Worcester County Average	\$47,874	\$65,772	\$71,895	37.4%	9.3%
State Average	\$50,502	\$65,981	\$77,378	30.7%	17.3%
National Average	\$41,994	\$50,406	\$60,293	20.0%	19.6%
Source: 2000 and 2010 US Census and 2018 ACS 5-Year Estimates (Table S1901)					

Table 4 - Family Income

Political Subdivision	Median Family Income (2000)	Median Family Income (2010)	Median Family Income (2018)	Percent Change: 2000 to 2010	Percent Change: 2010 to 2018
<b>Westminster</b>	<b>\$61,835</b>	<b>\$82,596</b>	<b>\$110,152</b>	<b>33.6%</b>	<b>33.4%</b>
Worcester County Average	\$58,394	\$81,342	\$93,012	39.3%	14.3%
State Average	\$61,664	\$83,371	\$98,625	35.2%	18.3%
National Average	\$50,046	\$64,400	\$73,965	28.7%	14.9%
Source: 2000 and 2010 US Census, and 2018 ACS 5-Year Estimates (Table S1901)					

The two previous tables indicate that Westminster fared much better than the State, County and the Nation in terms of household and family income since the start of the new millennium.

Table 5 - Poverty Information

Political Subdivision	Population Counts 2010	Number Below Poverty	% Below Poverty	Population Counts 2018	Number Below Poverty	% Below Poverty	% Change 2010 to 2018
Westminster	7,277	276	3.8%	7,639	161	2.1%	-41.7%
Worcester County Ave.	798,552	79,056	9.9%	794,423	82,745	10.4%	4.7%
State Average	6,547,629	700,596	10.7%	6,593,960	710,305	10.8%	1.4%
National Average	308,745,538	49,090,539	15.9%	314,943,184	44,257,979	14.1%	-9.8%

Source: 2010 US Census and 2018 ACS 5-Year Estimates (Table S1701)

The previous table indicates that while Westminster's poverty rate has shrunk significantly since the new millennium, the rate for Worcester County and the State as a whole has increased.

An assessment of age characteristics is necessary to appreciate the policy implications of population changes over time. For example, how large is the school-aged population in the town and how is it expected to change? How many seniors are living in the community now and in the future? What are the recreation policy implications based on age characteristics?

The demographic profile shows that seniors (ages 65 and over) and “soon to be seniors” population (ages 55 – 64) are the fastest growing segments of Westminster’s population during the last decade. Such folks are typically still active, with many participating in such activities as biking, hiking and water sports. The Town’s senior population has risen steadily during the last 40 years and the Town is actively trying to serve the recreation needs of this constituency by building a community-senior center at 69 West Main Street (opened in 2013), about half a mile from the Town Center.

While the Town’s school age population (ages 5 – 19) has declined slightly during the last decade, the Town’s Parks & Recreation Committee continues to list new athletic fields as one of its most pressing needs. What is most notable is the decline in the 35 - 54 age categories (family rearing ages). While this is a State-wide trend, it is more pronounced in Westminster. The lack of affordable housing in Town may be a contributing factor.

*Table - 6 Westminster Age Distributions*

Age Group Category	2010	2018	% Change 2010 to 2018
Under 5 years of age	319	353	10.7%
5 - 19 years of age	1583	1451	-8.3%
20 - 34 years of age	962	1180	22.7%
35 - 44 years of age	1036	866	-16.4%
45 - 54 years of age	1372	938	-31.6%
55 - 64 years of age	1170	1575	34.6%
65 - 74 years of age	468	887	89.5%
75 years of age or older	367	415	13.1%
Median Age	42.8	44.9	

Source: 2010 US Census and 2018 ACS 5-Year Estimates (Table DP05)

*Table 7 - Median Age 1990 – 2018*

Table 7 - Median Age 1990 – 2018				
Political Subdivision	Median Age 1990	Median Age 2000	Median Age 2010	Median Age 2018
<b>Westminster</b>	<b>35.1</b>	<b>38.6</b>	<b>42.8</b>	<b>44.9</b>
Worcester County Average	32.9	37.4	39.2	40.1
State Average	33.5	36.5	40.3	39.4
Sources: 1990, 2000, and 2010 US Censuses and 2018 ACS 5-Year Estimates (Table DP05)				

The previous table indicates that the median age for the State, county and Westminster continue to skew older than previous decades.

#### D. GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS

The vast majority of new homes built over the past decade have been along existing public ways through the Approval Not Required (ANR) process. New subdivision activity dropped off significantly since the onset of the Great Recession (late 2007) and several large subdivisions approved before the recession have since become ground-mounted solar fields. At present, there are a few large subdivisions (Village at Old Mill and Westminster Estates) approved before the recession that are currently under construction, but only one new subdivision (Lighthouse Lane) has been approved in the last decade.

*Table 8 - Subdivision Activity in Westminster 2000-present*

<b>Subdivision Name</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Number of Lots</b>	<b>Date approved</b>	<b>Status</b>
Westminster Estates	Bean Porridge Hill Road	304	126	June 2003	Two of four phases underway
Village at Old Mill	Route 2A	112	53	June 2002	Mostly built
Lighthouse Lane	Newton Road	48	16	May 2017	Mostly built
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>464</b>	<b>195</b>		

Other significant development trends over the past decade are as follows:

- Between the years 2000 and 2018 Westminster’s population increased from 6,907 to 7,665. In 2001, the MA Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs funded build-out studies for all municipalities in the Commonwealth. A build-out study attempts to determine what the community would look like if all of its vacant developable land were built out according to current zoning standards. Westminster’s build-out study predicted the Town would have over 22,000 residents at full build-out.
- At the same time the population increased by 758 residents since the start of the millennium, the number of housing units increased from 2,694 to 3,291, an increase of 597 units.
- Westminster’s population grew faster than at least 16 out of 22 communities in the Montachusett region during the last twenty years, but the growth rate has slowed considerably since then.
- Between 1971 and 1999 (the most recent State-wide land use mapping effort), the Town saw 1,423 acres of forest land and 118 acres of pastureland converted to predominantly residential uses, and to a lesser extent, commercial and industrial uses. Unfortunately, the conversion of forest and farmland into residences has been a region-wide phenomenon that continues to this day.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

Westminster's economic development trends are highlighted below:

- The Village Center is a “hub” of commercial activity servicing many of the needs of residents and attracting visitors to the community who frequent Wachusett Mountain Ski Area and other recreation and historic amenities in the community and region. The Village Center contains three restaurants, two pizza shops, a grocery store, a handful of retailers and a small amount of office space.
- The importance of the Wachusett Mountain Ski Area to the local economy is significant, as is the Great Wolf Lodge just across the border in Fitchburg. While these recreational sites offer employment to residents from the community and region, other businesses in the region, such as restaurants, hotels and gas stations, benefit from its presence.
- There are several large employers that have good access to State Route 2. These are Simplex-Grinnell, Wachusett Brewery, Seaboard Box Company and Ranor. All told, these four employers account for 973 jobs, or 37% of the total number of jobs in Westminster.
- Simplex-Grinnell (a division of Tyco) is the largest employer in the Town with approximately 625 employees. This facility was formerly owned by Simplex and Digital Equipment Corporation prior to ownership and occupation by Simplex-Grinnell. This employment site has seen periods of both increases and decreases in employment, unfortunately the recent trend has been a reduction of jobs at the site, dropping from 1,508 jobs in 2002 to just over 600 jobs today. However, it should be noted that national companies often shift jobs around from one region to another and this is particularly true in the case of Simplex-Grinnell.
- The Town has two large swaths of industrially-zoned land that have a considerable amount of vacant and developable land. The first is the Westminster Business Park off Depot Road. The Park contains 249 acres of land and is fully permitted for 1.57 million square feet of new floor space. While the first phase of the Park is complete, the second and larger phase is still under construction and may take as many as ten more years to complete. The Park also has 7,000 linear feet of frontage along the Boston & Maine railroad line (owned by Pan Am Southern) with three Business Park lots having the potential to be used for the shipping and receiving of freight. The second large industrial area is Simplex Drive. This site consists of 95 acres in a lush wooded setting. There is an existing building on the other side of the road that contains 658,017 square feet of floor space, broken into four industrial "pods". This building now has three and a half of the pods occupied, or 87% of the available space. Beyond the existing building, this site has enough vacant developable land to accommodate an additional one million square feet of new floor space.
- A regional market analysis prepared by Camoin Associates in April 2018 identified a need for large warehouse spaces (200,000 square feet or more). Westminster's two large industrial areas (Westminster Business Park and Simplex Drive) have generated some market interest in this regard.

- The “gateway” along State Route 2A along the Westminster-Gardner municipal boundary (where Simplex Drive is located) has been the subject of much debate amongst Westminster policy makers. In 2007, Westminster commissioned Dr. John Mullin of Mullin Associates Inc. to prepare a report on behalf of the Town’s Economic Development Study Committee, which was tasked with evaluating the potential of the commercial districts along Route 2. The report, entitled: Final Report of the Economic Development Study Committee: Westminster’s Future Economic Development Opportunities, set forth the following findings:
  - The Route 2 Corridor represents Westminster’s primary gateway to distant points and reflects Westminster’s historic, cultural and rural values.
  - The Corridor has tremendous potential for industrial development and low- density commercial development.
  - The Corridor, in terms of industrial growth, will grow very slowly: large-scale growth will be largely blocked by Devens while infill development is most likely to occur in nearby Fitchburg, Leominster and Gardner.
  - There is demand for large-scale commercial development.
  - It was the consensus of the Committee that large-scale commercial development would change the character of the corridor.
  - Based on a fiscal impact analysis, the Corridor has the potential to replace the lost revenue from the Landfill’s eventual closure.
  - While the Corridor has the potential to be developed, it is essential that its assets be marketed.
  - While the Corridor’s zoning does currently protect the Town from large-scale commercial development, it does not in itself ensure that other forms of development will match the Town’s character.

The report concluded with the following recommendations:

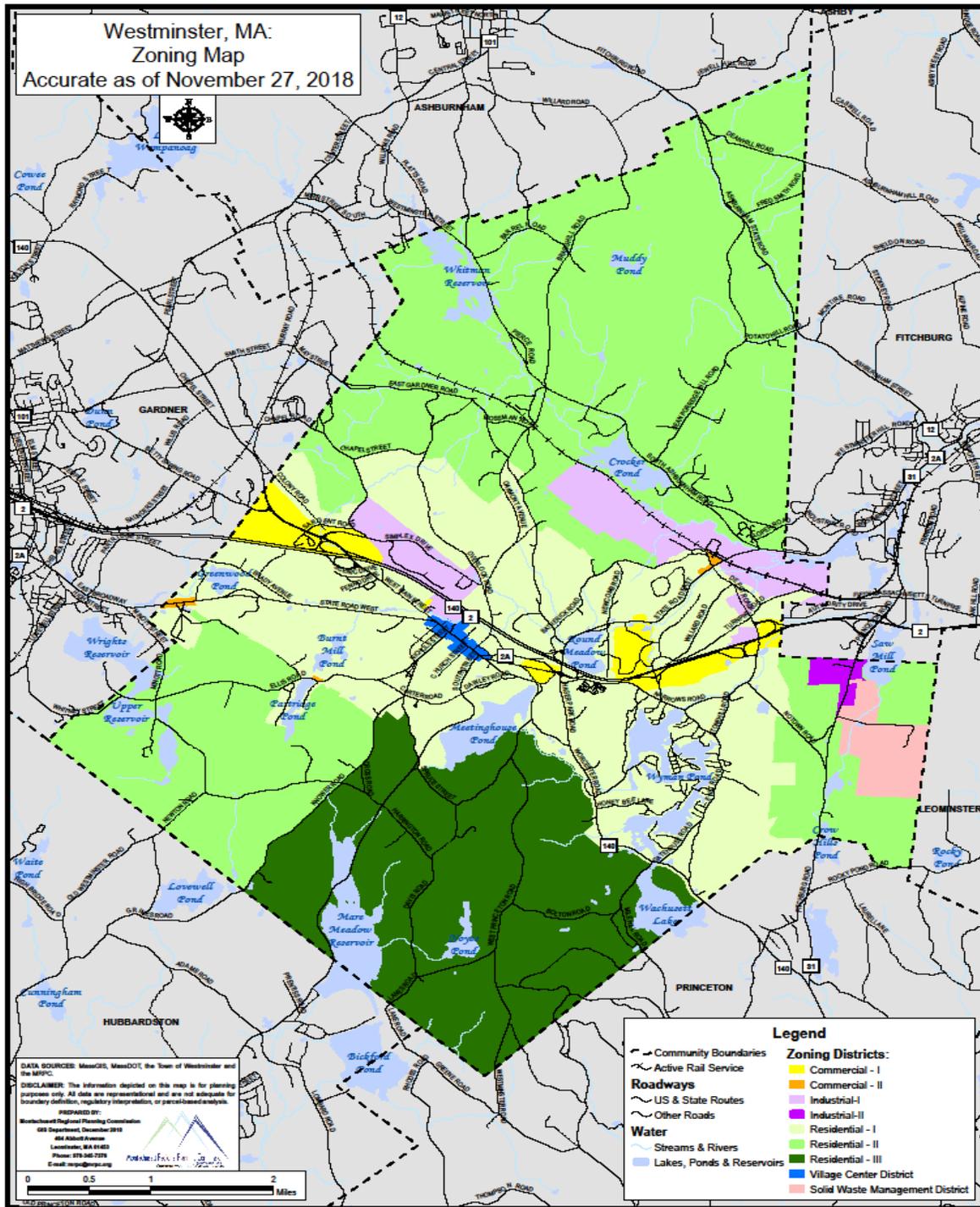
- The present zoning bylaw, including the limitation of retail operations to no more than 25,000 square feet of floor space, should remain in place at this time.
- The Town should explore means and methods to ensure tighter performance standards and site design requirements that reflect the Town’s character.
- The Town, working through its partners at the State and Regional level, should begin to market the Corridor.
- The Town should explore designating its two industrial parks as Priority Development sites through the State’s streamlined permitting legislation (MGL 43D).
- The Town should explore the creation of a mixed use overlay district for at least part of the Corridor.
- The Town should determine if it is adequately covered in terms of fiber-optic connectivity.
- The Town, through use of the Fiscal Impact Assessment Model (described in detail within the report), should carefully monitor the financial impacts of growth and report the findings on an annual basis.

- The Town should continue the activities of the Economic Development Study Committee.

While the Economic Development Study Committee ceased its activities in early 2011 after an exhaustive review of a lifestyle mall proposed by a private developer for the Simplex Drive area (never built), the Town has gone forward and implemented several of the recommendations from the Mullins report, including: designating three industrial districts as Priority Development sites through MGL 43D.

Many of the Economic Development Study Committee's activities are now being carried out by the newly formed Economic Development Committee (EDC). Created by the Board of Selectmen during the summer of 2012, the EDC's charge is to take a broader town-wide view of economic development, and look for ways to promote the Town to the outside world for the purpose of encouraging new economic activity and the tax revenues it could generate. Since its inception in 2012, the EDC has conducted the following activities:

- Created a promotional brochure in 2013, updated and reprinted in 2017.
- Received a MassBio gold rating in 2013.
- Conducted a targeted business solicitation effort in 2014.
- Prepared a list of local businesses in 2014, updated in 2017.
- Prepared a list of commercial and industrial properties in 2014, updated in 2017.
- Worked with Northeastern University's Dukakis Center to conduct an Economic Development Self-Assessment in 2017.
- Received a Mass-Development Site Readiness grant in 2018, which enabled the Town to conduct an in-depth analysis of infrastructure needs for two large industrially-zoned properties (Simplex Drive and the Westminster Business Park). An industrial sites market analysis was also prepared as part of this project.
- Initiated a wayfaring signage program for the Town.



The EDC's efforts also resulted in an offshoot non-profit organization entitled the Westminster Village Foundation which has sponsored four iterations of the Westminster Cracker Festival held each October.

The table on the following page presents the number of employed/unemployed Westminster residents dating back to 2000. The table also allows for a comparison of Westminster's unemployment rate with the Worcester County and State unemployment rates.

*Table 9  
Employment Status of Westminster Residents*

Year	Total Westminster Labor Force	Employed	Unemployed	Westminster Unemployment Rate	Worcester County Unemployment Rate	State Rate
2008	3,858	3,625	233	6.0%	6.0%	5.5%
2009	3,822	3,478	344	9.0%	8.9%	8.1%
2010	4,304	3,951	353	8.2%	8.8%	8.3%
2011	4,228	3,923	305	7.2%	7.7%	7.3%
2012	4,246	3,943	303	7.1%	7.2%	6.7%
2013	4,277	3,979	298	7.0%	7.2%	6.7%
2014	4,353	4,107	246	5.7%	6.1%	5.7%
2015	4,388	4,196	192	4.4%	5.1%	4.8%
2016	4,481	4,310	171	3.8%	4.1%	3.9%
2017	4,646	4,476	170	3.7%	3.9%	3.7%
2018	4,818	4,669	149	3.1%	3.6%	3.4%
2019	4,799	4,676	123	2.6%	3.1%	2.9%

Source: Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development.

Where Westminster Residents Work:

At one time, the US Census Bureau compiled workplace origin/destination statistics for every community as part of once-a-decade national census effort. Although such information was not collected for the 2010 US Census, the 2000 Census data does provide some insight, albeit dated, as to where Westminster residents work.

In Westminster:	648 (18.9% of workforce)
Fitchburg:	521 (15.2%)
Leominster:	422 (12.3%)
Gardner:	329 (9.6%)
Worcester:	271 (7.9%)
Boston:	97 (2.8%)

The 2018 American Community Survey (ACS) provides a breakdown of where Westminster residents work, but not in as great of detail as the 2000 Census. The 2018 ACS tells us that 16.4% of employed residents work in Westminster, a drop-off of 2.5% since 2000. The number of Westminster job-holders working out of Town will likely increase due to the presence of the new MBTA commuter rail station (Wachusett Station) built just across the border in Fitchburg.

Getting to Work:

Using data from the 2010 US Census Survey and the 2018 American Community Survey, a comparison can be made as to how Westminster’s workforce gets to work and how its commuting patterns have changed during the past decade.

	<u>2010</u>	<u>2018</u>
Drove Alone	78.5%	87.0%
Car-Pooled	8.7%	3.7%
Walk/Bike	1.2%	0.5%
Public Transit	1.3%	1.0%
Worked at Home	10.3%	4.4%

Reviewing the figures above, it is interesting to note that the “driving to work alone” category was the only one to increase over the past decade, while the others (car-pool, walking/biking, public transit and working at home) all declined. This is exactly the opposite of what happened between 2000 and 2010 when driving to work alone decreased while the other categories increased. It will be interesting to see how much the presence of the new Wachusett Station impacts the “public transit” figure during the next decennial census in 2020.

The Number and Types of Jobs in Westminster:

The next set of numbers is also from the MA Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development and chronicles the number of jobs residing in Westminster (in-town jobs) as of 2018.

A few things to note for Table 10: they are annual averages and not seasonally adjusted, the numbers are real jobs reported by the employer themselves, they count *all* jobs whether full-time or part-time, they do not count the self-employed and those businesses that consist solely of members from a single family (like a family-owned farm). Also note that the industry categories are based on the North American Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) system.

*Table 10  
2018 Average In-Town Employment and Wages  
by Industry All Ownership*

Industry	Establishments	Total Wages	Average Employment	Average Weekly Wage
Total, All Industries	218	\$141,992,883	2,635	\$1,036
Construction	37	\$5,927,131	127	\$898
Manufacturing	15	\$34,904,604	576	\$1,165
Wholesale Trade	14	\$1,485,764	16	\$1,786
Retail Trade	14	\$2,538,629	95	\$514
Transportation and Warehousing	10	\$3,839,855	112	\$659
Finance and Insurance	7	\$413,847	11	\$724
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	7	\$925,389	14	\$1,271
Administrative and Waste Services	21	\$2,598,651	74	\$675
Health Care and Social Assistance	37	\$9,168,480	217	\$813
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	4	\$302,793	14	\$416
Accommodation and Food Services	10	\$3,442,481	182	\$364
Other Services, Except Public Administration	15	\$1,334,229	61	\$421

Source: Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance (DUA) - Labor Market Information (LMI)

Interesting to note that the number of business establishments has increased from 206 in 2011 to 218 in 2018, and the average employment has increased from 2,533 in 2011 to 2,635 in 2018 (a 3.8% increase). The average weekly wage has increased from \$977 in 2011 to \$1,036 in 2018 (a 6.5% increase).

For Table 10, please note that Westminster’s total in-town jobs figure is listed under the “Total, All Industries” heading, and then the table presents job counts for the major employment categories, but not all employment categories. Thus, the job numbers in the employment categories will not add up to Westminster’s total number of in-town jobs.

The previous table indicates there were 2,635 jobs in Westminster as of 2018. While, this represents a 28% decrease since 2000 when there were 3,640 jobs existing in Westminster, these numbers are a bit misleading. Just because the numbers technically show that Westminster “lost” jobs over the past 20 years, this does not necessarily mean that these jobs simply disappeared and went away. Westminster is home to several companies that have a national presence: Aubuchon Hardware, Illinois Tool Works, and Tyco. National companies often shift jobs around from one region to another and this partially explains Westminster’s job “losses” of the last decade. This is particularly true in the case of Tyco. According to the company’s annual report to the Town as part of its Tax Increment Financing (TIF) agreement, Tyco hosted 1,508 jobs at its Westminster location in 2002, but the number of jobs dropped to 625 jobs by 2018. Thus, the bulk of the Town’s job “losses” can be tied to this one employer. Again, these jobs didn’t just disappear, but were moved to other Tyco locations throughout the country. It should be noted that the State rescinded the Company’s TIF agreement in 2011 because it did not meet its hiring targets.

Westminster has always welcomed those businesses and industries that offer living wage jobs and has so far resisted siren song of big box retailers and chain restaurants (the Village Center Subway and Dunkin Donuts not withstanding). On two occasions during the last twenty years, Town Meeting voters have said “no” to large-scale retail operations that were proposed to be located in close proximity to Route 2.

While the Town may have technically “lost” some of its manufacturing jobs, other manufacturers in Town continue to grow and expand, such as Ranor Inc., a manufacturer of industrial-scale chambers and vessels, and the Wachusett Brewery which started with a dozen employees and is now close to 100 employees. Also, 2016 saw the arrival of Seaboard Box Company, which moved into one of the industrial pods in the Simplex industrial building, bringing 156 jobs with them.

New retail establishments have been fairly limited over the last twenty years. Retail and service providers have come and gone from the plazas in the Village Center. Native Joe's Farmstand is the first new business to take advantage of the mixed use opportunities that now exist for the Village Center zoning district (adopted in 2016). Other than that, there is a Dollar General store along Route 2 East near its intersection with Depot Road.

The Townspeople are very aware they have two large industrial districts (Simplex Drive and the Westminster Business Park) that are ripe for industrial development which pays much better wages than retail development. There are still 114 acres of vacant developable land off of Simplex Drive and 249 acres in the Westminster Business Park. The Park is currently under construction and may require another 10 years to complete. The Park owners are essentially turning a gravel pit into a pad-ready industrial park with full infrastructure. Once complete, the Park is permitted to host approximately 1.5 million square feet of new floor space which, if used for industrial purposes, could host over 700 new jobs.



The table on the following page allows for a comparison of the types and number of in-town jobs for Westminster and its neighbors as of 2018.

*Table 11*  
*Number of In-Town Jobs by Employment Major Category - Year 2018 Comparison*

	<b>Westminster</b>	Ashburnham	Hubbardston	Princeton	Gardner	Leominster	Fitchburg
Construction	127	103	48	48	159	741	510
Manufacturing	576	32	42	0	1082	3335	1280
Wholesale/Retail	111	124	9	26	1223	4974	1943
Transpo/Warehouse	112	14	0	0	152	434	494
Finance/Real Estate/Info.	25	0	0	18	299	966	582
Professional/Admin.	74	19	30	14	370	1795	809
Health Care/Social/Education	217	585	99	60	3626	3595	4940
Arts/Entertainment/Rec.	14	0	0	0	89	170	140
Food/Lodging	182	94	0	79	854	2358	1552
Other Services	61	10	9	56	768	1201	1057
Total # of Establishments	218	129	72	90	524	1449	1242
Total In-Town Jobs	2635	1080	412	780	8647	20657	13328
Total Annual Wages Paid	\$142.0 million	\$49.3 million	\$16.0 million	\$24.8 million	\$408.5 million	\$893.3 million	\$603.8 million

Source: Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance (DUA) - Labor Market Information (LMI)

Please note that as with Table 10, Table 11 does not list every employment category in existence, just the major employment categories. Further, the major employment categories do not capture every single job in each town. For instance, Table 10 doesn't list any jobs for Westminster's neighbors in the agriculture/forestry/fishing category; however, such jobs most certainly do exist in these communities. Tables 10 and 11 represents the State's best estimate as to the number of in-town jobs for Westminster and its neighbors. Again, Table 10 does not include the self-employed or family-owned businesses where all employees are members of the family.

The previous table indicates that Westminster has more in-town jobs, establishments and a larger average payroll than its three rural neighbors, but less than its three urban neighbors. This indicates that Westminster has a healthy number of businesses and industries for a small rural community and has been meeting its stated goal of hosting living wage jobs.

#### In-Town Job Projections:

MRPC's most recent Regional Transportation Plan (2020) uses the MassDOT Traffic Demand Model to forecast the number of residents and in-town jobs for each of their 22 member communities up to the year 2040.

According to the most recent forecast, Westminster can expect to have 7,607 residents and 2,596 in-town jobs by the year 2030, and 7,420 residents and 2,576 in-town jobs by 2040. These projections should be taken with a grain of salt because the current pace of building activity indicates that Westminster's population growth won't be declining anytime soon. Also, the Town has a vast amount of vacant buildable land zoned for industry that is slated for development, which eventually translate to an increase in in-town jobs.

## LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

The tables below present a breakdown of Westminster's development pattern as of 2001. The land use pattern was delineated from ortho-photographs taken in 1999 by the University of Massachusetts – Amherst as part of a statewide land use mapping effort, which still represents the most recent land use mapping effort undertaken by the State. The UMass land use maps were further refined by the Regional Planning Commission in March of 2001.

**Table-12  
Westminster Development Pattern – 2001**

<u>Developed Land</u>	<u>Permanently Protected Land*</u>	<u>Land With Environmental Constraints (non-buildable)</u>
3,892 acres	6,987 acres	5,094 acres
2,717 acres of residential		1,324 acres of waterbodies
79 acres of commercial		1,840 acres of wetlands/floodplains
632 acres of industrial		548 acres of river buffers
464 acres institutional		1,382 acres of steep slopes

\* = Permanently Protected Lands: State-owned Wildlife Management Areas, Town-owned conservation properties, and non-profit lands having conservation easements.

Source: MRPC GIS analysis (March 2001) based on 1999 UMass land use data, except for the permanently protected land total which was recalculated by MRPC in 2013.

**Table 13  
Westminster Land Use 2001 – Breakdown of Total Town Land Area**

Total Land Area:	22,720 acres
Total Amount of Developed Land:	3,892 acres (17.1% of total land area)
Total Amount of Permanently Protected Land:	6,987 acres (30.7% of total land area)
Other Non-Buildable Land:	5,094 acres (22.4% of total land area)
Remaining Amount of Vacant Developable Land:	6,747 acres (29.7% of total land area)

Source: MRPC GIS analysis (March 2001) based on 1999 UMass land use data.

So how has the Town's land use pattern changed since the start of the new millennium? Based on data from the Westminster Board of Assessors, the Town has added approximately 767 acres of permanently protected land since 2000, for a grand total of approximately 7,610 acres. This represents 31.9% of the Town's land area, up from 31% back in 2000. According to records from the Building Department, approximately 1,622 acres of land has been developed since 2000, for a grand total of approximately 5,514 acres. This represents 24.3% of the Town's land area, up from 17.1% back in 2000. The development pattern today is such that the majority of buildable land with road frontage has been built on, and now developers are turning their attention to land having development constraints (steep slopes, wetlands, etc.) and backland with limited frontage.

## TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Route 2 is the most important roadway to the Town and the region, running east west through the entire region. This limited access roadway provides the area with a direct link to Boston and to the western half of the state. Route 2 connects Westminster to all the region's major urban communities including Fitchburg, Leominster and Gardner.

Other arterial roads that pass through Westminster are Route 140, Route 12, Route 31 and Route 2A. Collector roads in Westminster include: South Ashburnham Road, Oakmont Avenue/Bacon Street, West Main Street, Minott Road, and South Street.

In terms of public transportation, there is no fixed route bus service provided in Westminster. The Montachusett Area Regional Transit Authority (MART) organizes services that provide para-transit service for the elderly, disabled or disadvantaged population. MART contracts with social and human service agencies for para-transit service. The Town and MART provide service in Westminster through the Council on Aging that employs a paid coordinator funded jointly.

There is one intercity operator that travels through the Montachusett Region, Peter Pan Bus Lines that stops at Bickford's Family Restaurant at the junction of State Route 2 and Route 12 in Leominster. Peter Pan has one bus, which leaves daily from the Bickford's Family Restaurant and connects the cities of Leominster, Worcester, Boston, Springfield, Hartford, CT and New York City. The bus leaves the restaurant at 7:35 a.m. daily and returns from Worcester at 5:45 p.m.; Traveling north leaving Bickford's Family Restaurant stop at 6:15 p.m. daily to Concord NH via the cities of Lowell, Nashua NH and Manchester NH.

Commuter rail service previously existed from Gardner to Boston. The trains passed through Westminster, but did not stop. The service to Gardner was drastically cut back late in 1983 and discontinued on January 1, 1987. Today the MBTA provides service along the Fitchburg line to North Station in Boston. The train line terminates at the new MBTA Wachusett Station just over the border in Fitchburg, in the vicinity of Route 2. The layover station (where trains will be parked at night) is located a mile north of Wachusett Station in Westminster within the Westminster Business Park.

There are no formal bicycle lanes in Westminster, however mountain biking is a popular recreation activity on those Town-owned conservation properties that allow it. In terms of walking, there is a network of sidewalks within the Town Center and the Town's Subdivision Regulations do give the Planning Board the authority to require sidewalks for new subdivisions where appropriate.

## ZONING

The table on the following page provides the acres for each zoning district in Westminster along with its percentage of the Town's total land area.

Table 14: Westminster Zoning Districts

District	Name	Area Acres	Percent of Town
R-I	Residential One	6525	27.4%
R-II	Residential Two	10813	45.3%
R-III	Residential Three	4550	19.1%
C-I	Highway Business	544	2.3%
C-II	Neighborhood Business	22	0.1%
I-I	Industrial One	902	3.8%
I-II	Industrial Two	94	0.4%
SWMD	Solid Waste Management District	336	1.4%
VCD	Village Center District	57	0.2%

Source: MRPC Zoning Layer, dated 2018

Zoning Issues:

Westminster enacted its first Zoning Bylaw at a Town Meeting held on January 22, 1974. The Town's 2014 Master Planning effort identified a number of flaws in the Zoning Bylaw, most notably that it was antiquated, poorly organized, confusing to read, presented limited options for all types of development and did not contain many of the Smart Growth techniques and tools being promoted by the State and the national planning community. Recognizing this, the Westminster Planning Board undertook a three-phased approach to revising the Zoning Bylaw with an eye towards bringing the document in line with 21st Century best practices for zoning. The commercial and industrial development sections were revised in 2015, the residential sections were revised in 2016 and 2017, and the sign bylaw was revised in 2018. The most notable changes to the Zoning Bylaw include:

- Consolidating zoning in the Village Center into a single mixed-use zoning district that allowed for residential, office and small-scale retail development.
- Changing the cluster housing bylaw to allow such developments By Right instead of Special Permit.
- Changing the accessory dwelling bylaw to allow such units By Right instead of Special Permit.

- Revising the parking section of the bylaw to reduce the amount of parking required and allow for flexible parking arrangements within the Village Center.

The Town now has a modern up-to-date Zoning Bylaw that aligns with the planning profession's best practices for small town zoning.

It should be noted that the spatial layout of Westminster's various zoning districts (done in the mid-1970s) is actually very well thought out: commercial districts are located in close proximity to Route 2 and Route 140, industrial districts are located close to Route 2 and the railroad, denser residential development in the Town Center and on either side of Route 2, and then rural residential development as one moves further away from the Town Center.

## WASTE DISPOSAL

The Fitchburg Municipal Landfill, operated by Waste Management Inc. is located on Route 31 in Westminster and adjacent to the Leominster State Forest. The landfill serves the greater Fitchburg region. The expanded landfill area (nearly double in size from the original landfill) was opened in 2004. The landfill is slated to close in 2024. Westminster and Waste Management are currently reviewing its options for expanding the landfill and/or extending its useful life.

## MUNICIPAL WATER

The Town currently obtains water supply from the City of Fitchburg through an inter-municipal agreement (IMA). A copy of the Water IMA can be found here: <http://www.westminster-ma.gov/pages/mp/water.pdf> . The current IMA will expire upon the Regional Water Filtration Facility reaching the end of its useful life. The IMA was created to allow for the construction of the Regional Water Filtration Facility on Hager Park Road that went online in 2001. The treated water from the treatment plant is for distribution for both the City of Fitchburg and the Town of Westminster.

Prior to building the Regional Water Filtration Treatment Facility, the Town withdrew water from Meetinghouse Pond and provided limited chlorination and fluoridation treatment at the South Street Pump Station. The South Street Pump Station is currently an emergency backup source. The IMA allows the Town to obtain a maximum daily flow of 870,000 gallons per day (gpd) with the right to a maximum daily flow of up to 1,500,000 gpd. The costs to the Town for water supply include portions of the treatment facility capital costs as well as operations and management costs at the Facility.

In 1951, Acts of Legislature were approved to allow the Town to use up to 100 million gallons of water per year from Meetinghouse Pond at no cost. The Acts of 1951 also required Westminster and Fitchburg to enter into an agreement as to the price to be paid by Westminster to Fitchburg for water used by Westminster in excess of the 100 million gallons per year. In 1971, an agreement with the City of Fitchburg requires Westminster to pay \$60.00 per million gallons used in excess over the 100 million gallons permitted by the Acts of 1951.

The total amount of water purchased annually from Fitchburg has increased by 108% from 2000 to 2019, from 79,235,700 gallons to 164,500,000 gallons. In 2019, the average daily demand was 450,700 gpd and the maximum daily demand was 816,000 gpd, both well below the maximum allowed by the IMA, meaning that capacity is not an issue regarding the municipal water system. On a per capita basis, Westminster residential water customers use an average of 49 gallons of water per person per day.

The water supply is derived solely from surface water reservoirs owned and maintained by the City of Fitchburg, Meetinghouse Pond and Mare Meadow Reservoir in Westminster and Bickford Pond in Hubbardston. The City of Fitchburg currently owns 1,557 acres of land around Meetinghouse Pond and Mare Meadow Reservoir for the purpose of water supply protection. Meetinghouse Pond has a safe yield of 1.03 million gallons per day (mgd) and Mare Meadow Reservoir has a safe yield of 2.50 mgd.

Treated water is delivered to the Hager Park Pump Station adjacent to the Water Treatment Facility. The Hager Park Pump Station delivers water to the Westminster distribution system. The Westminster Water Department operates and maintains the system which consists of approximately thirty-five linear miles of water pipes, four pressure reducing valves and two water storage tanks. The distribution system was constructed in 1955, with additional extensions in the 1960's and 1970's, and small additions since then. There are approximately 1,170 customers connected to the system. The Department also provides water to two small water districts in Town, Leino Park and Holmes Park. Water lines extend through the Town covering portions of Route 2A, Hager Park Road, Route 140, Village Inn Road, Carter Road, Dawley Road, Overlook Road, Simplex Drive, North Common Road, Ellis Road, South Street, Main Street, West Main Street and the Town Center area. Each Westminster water customer has their use metered and billing is done by the Westminster Water Division.

One water supply concern is the 23 miles of concrete/asbestos pipes that are part of the municipal water system. Age and soil conditions will eventually cause some of these pipes to fail, causing disruption to the system. The Water Division is planning to start replacing the majority of these pipes and this will be a multi-year effort. In 2019, the Water Division conducted a leak detection survey and found several leaks that have since been repaired.

## MUNICIPAL SEWER

Municipal sewage collection is a relatively new phenomenon in Westminster. In 1971 the MA Water Resources Commission determined that Round Meadow Pond was being polluted by development in the Town Center area through wastewater discharges to storm drains that discharged to the pond. To address this issue, the Town hired SEA Consultants in 1975 and they prepared a Report on Wastewater Collection and Disposal Facilities. This report proposed a phased sewer line installation program with the priority areas being the Town Center and around Wyman Pond. However, the report concluded that it was not economically feasible at the time to provide sewers to Wyman Pond and it was also noted that the Nashua River Basin Plan prohibited new discharges into the Whitman River, regardless of quality, which effectively eliminated in town sewage treatment as an option. A subsequent study prepared by DuFresne-Henry in 1982 (Facilities Planning Report for Wastewater Collection and Treatment Facilities) concluded that

transporting wastewater from the Town Center area to the West Fitchburg Treatment Plant was the optimal solution.

In 1983 the Town entered into an inter-municipal agreement (IMA) with the City of Fitchburg to send wastewater collected by the Town wastewater collection system to Fitchburg for treatment and disposal. The IMA was amended in 1991, 1995 and to increase the allowable amount of flow discharged to Fitchburg and to add an additional connection to the Fitchburg sewer system. The second amendment to the 1995 IMA occurred in March 2020 and allows for a two year extension in order to allow the City of Fitchburg to plan for expansion of the sewer system.

The current IMA allows the Town to discharge up to 320,000 gallons per day (gpd) to Fitchburg. There are two sewer discharge points to Fitchburg, one on Route 2A/State Road East and the other on Route 31/Fitchburg Road. The Town is allowed to discharge 250,000 gpd at the Route 2A/State Road East discharge point and 70,000 gpd at the Route 31/Fitchburg Road discharge point, for a total sewer discharge capacity of 320,000 gpd. All wastewater in Town is treated and disposed of at Fitchburg's East Treatment Plant. The total amount of sewer discharged annually to Fitchburg has increased by 57% from 2000 to 2019, from 41,562,680 gallons to 72,568,716 gallons. On average, the Town currently sends an average daily flow of approximately 199,000 gpd to the City of Fitchburg, although the daily flow can be as much as 280,000 gpd, which is getting close to the system's total discharge capacity of 320,000. The IMA is valid until the year 2022.

The original sewer system in Westminster was constructed in 1982 by the Wachusett Mountain Ski Area which was expanding and in need of service. The ski area connected to the Fitchburg sewer system and installed sewer pipes along Route 2A, Depot Road, Narrows Road, Stone Hill Road, East Road, Gatehouse Road and Mile Hill Road. The Whitman River Pump Station was installed to convey wastewater over the Whitman River and into Fitchburg. The Narrows Road Pump Station was also installed to convey wastewater over Route 2.

In 1984 the Town extended the recently built interceptor sewer along Route 2A/State Road East to provide service to the Town Center area and a limited amount of sewer lines were constructed along the eastern side of Wyman Pond. Between 1989 and 1998 several small extensions were constructed by various users including Simplex-Grinnell along Simplex Drive and Pinetree Power along Route 31/Fitchburg Road. Since then, sewer lines have been expanded further along Route 2 in the Town Center area as well as the Wyman Pond area, Ellis Road, Frog Hollow Road, Scenic Drive and Main Street.

The sewer collection system consists of approximately 17 miles of sewer pipes and includes seven pumping stations, gravity lines, and force mains. The system serves 808 customers. There are two distinct service areas in Westminster: the Whitman River area is the larger of the two and covers the Town Center area, and the Route 31 area is the smaller. Wastewater from Westminster is sent to the Fitchburg East sewage treatment plant that discharges treated wastewater to the Nashua River.

A sewer connection moratorium was in place between 2003 and 2017 due to limitations at the Whitman River Pumping Station. Recognizing sewer capacity as a limitation to development, the Town evaluated several options, eventually settling on the installation of an in-line sewer storage

system that could accommodate 200,000 gallons of storage and equalization of peak wastewater flows. In 2017, the Town obtained a grant/loan from USDA Rural Development that allowed for the installation of the in-line sewer storage system just off of Route 2 East, across from the Wachusett Brewery. Once operational, the Town the Town was able to lift the moratorium on new sewer connections in late 2018.

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## SECTION 4 - ENVIRONMENTAL INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

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### A. GEOLOGY, SOILS AND TOPOGRAPHY

Westminster is rich in scenic qualities, unique features and historic value. From the prominent peak of Wachusett Mountain to historic Academy Hill to archaeological sites, hilltop vistas, rolling farmland, and beautiful waterways, Westminster is a portrait of typical New England. Along with this bounty comes the opportunity and responsibility to preserve and protect what is uniquely Westminster. Efforts have begun. With strong, broad-based support and unified planning, Westminster has the prospect of retaining these elements that determine its sense of place and quality of life.

The general terrain of Westminster is gentle to steeply sloping, with few level areas. Elevations range from 648 feet at Sawmill Pond on the Fitchburg line to 1706 feet on the slope of Wachusett Mountain. Wachusett Mountain's peak is located in Princeton, just outside of Westminster and has an elevation of 2006 feet, the highest point in Massachusetts east of the Connecticut River. The general elevation in Westminster ranges from 900 feet to 1150 feet. Two unnamed hills, located near Church Rock between Davis and West Princeton Roads, exceed 1300 feet in elevation. There are nine other peaks exceeding 1200 feet in elevation, all located south of Route 2.

The soils in Westminster are primarily glacial tills. Most of the glacial till areas have only been mapped to the association level. Soil associations are groups of soils which occur adjacent to each other, often in an intermingled manner. These soils often have widely varying characteristics, which makes drawing conclusions based upon the soil mapping difficult in many areas.

Glacial outwash (sand and gravel) deposits occur in the Whitman River valley, between Willard Road and Route 2A, areas around Wyman Pond, areas around Partridge Pond, and areas around Upper Reservoir. Smaller, more scattered, outwash areas occur near the eastern base of Crow Hill and adjacent to the wetlands in the southwest portion of town, and along Ashburnham State Road.

Organic soils, peats and mucks occur in scattered locations throughout the Town. They are most extensive and numerous in the southwestern portion of Westminster, west of Knower Road and south of Route 2. Organic soils occur only in well-developed wetlands. There are several large areas mapped with soils having shallow or exposed bedrock. These areas are most common on the ridge of hills between South Ashburnham Road and Route 12, and from the slope of Wachusett Mountain north to Meetinghouse Pond. These areas are typically unsuitable for development due to the lack of soil for septic systems, high groundwater levels and expensive construction costs.

There are areas of glacial till with slopes greater than 25% at scattered locations throughout Town. Mapping of slope in the Open Space and Recreation Plan is based on the slopes shown on the US Geological Survey (USGS) quad maps as most of these areas occur on the soil maps as associations, where slope classification is not provided. Due to their steep slopes and soil textures, these areas have a significant erosion potential if vegetation and topsoil are removed. All told, Westminster has approximately 1,382 acres of land (or 6% of the Town's total land area) having slopes of 25% or greater.

Prime agricultural soils are not extensive in Westminister and occur in a few widely scattered areas. This is possibly one of the reasons for the early abandonment of agriculture in Town. These soils may be somewhat more commonplace than mapped, as the prime agricultural soils types occur in some of the associations. The soils types in Westminister that are considered prime agricultural soils are Sudbury Sandy Loam 0% to 3% slopes, Peru Fine Sandy Loam, Skerry Fine Sandy Loam, Marlow Fine Sandy Loam 3% to 8% slopes, and Becket Fine Sandy Loam 3% to 8% slopes. The attached Soils and Geologic Features Map shows the locations of floodplain soils, sand and gravel deposits, and till/bedrock locations in Westminister. For a graphic depiction of land suitable for farming in Westminister, please review the Active Farms and Farmland Soils Map.

## B. LANDSCAPE CHARACTERISTICS

Westminister contains 22,720 acres of land, or 35.5 square miles. The most definitive features of Westminister's landscape include: Wachusett Mountain, various hills, large forested areas, scenic lakes, and scenic vistas. The best vistas are from the ski slopes on Wachusett Mountain, the large fields at the High Ridge Wildlife Management Area, and Crow Hill ledges. Most of the significant landscape features such as Wachusett Mountain and most of the large lakes are currently in public ownership. The primary exceptions to this are portions of the Whitmanville Reservoir.



## C. WATER RESOURCES

There are many large lakes and ponds in Westminister that provide much of the Town's rural character. All told, there are 1,324 acres of open water in Westminister. The greatest concentration of waterbodies can be found south of Route 2. Most of the Town's lakes and ponds are either man-made or have been greatly enlarged due to damming. Whitmanville Reservoir and Crocker Pond are two large waterbodies that were once owned by paper companies to provide a clean source of water for the mills in Fitchburg, but no longer serve this purpose.

Only four waterbodies, Muddy Pond, Meetinghouse Pond, Wachusett Lake, and Wyman Pond are classified by the State as “great ponds” (at least 75 acres in size). Wyman Pond was dammed in 1893 but incorporates a great pond, known as Grassy Pond. Great ponds are naturally occurring waterbodies that are at least 10 acres in size in their natural state.

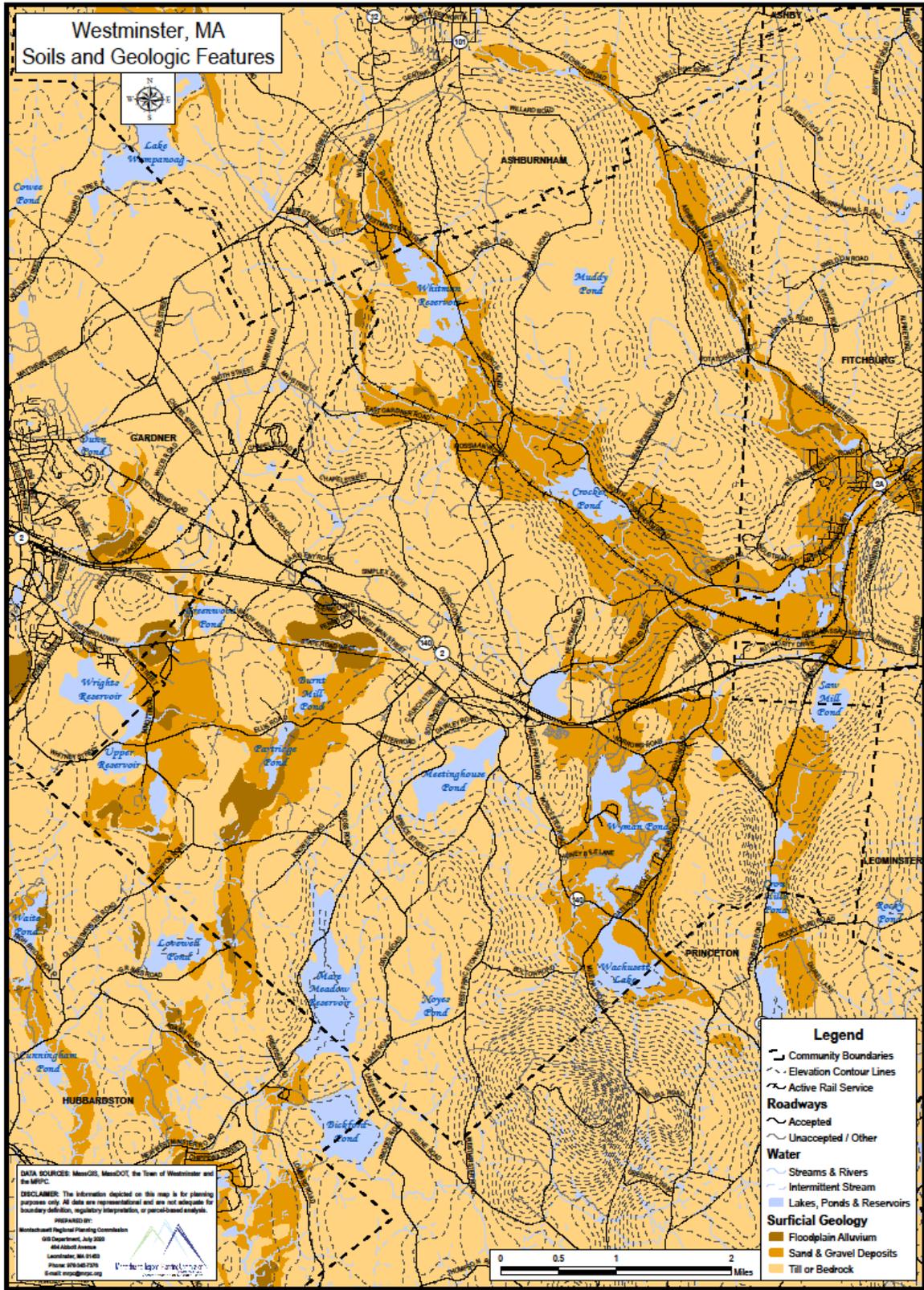
The largest waterbodies in Westminster are Mare Meadow Reservoir, Meetinghouse Pond and Wachusett Lake that is a natural glacial lake. All three of these are surface water supplies for Fitchburg and Westminster. The City of Fitchburg owns much of the surrounding land around these waterbodies.

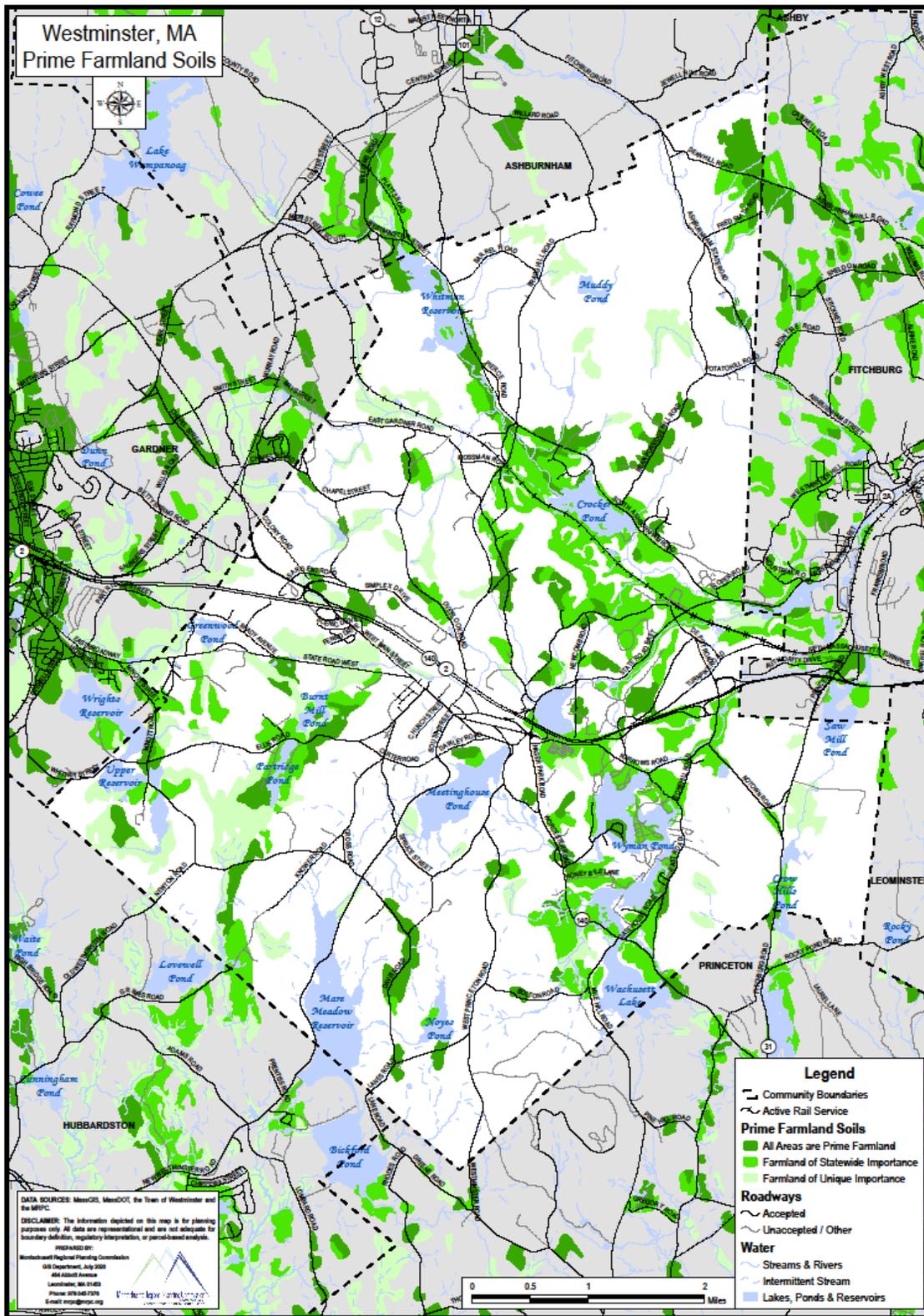


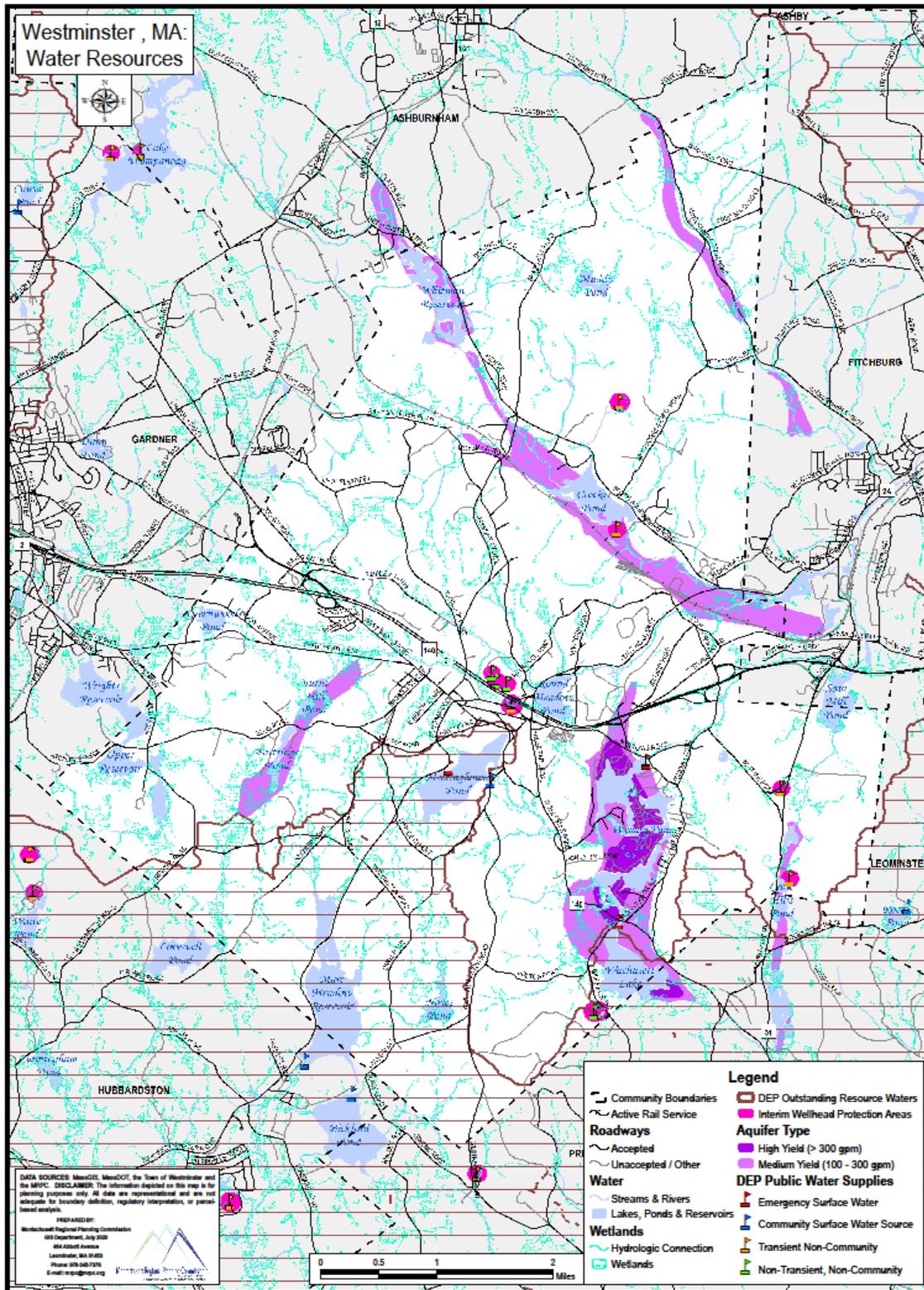
There are several smaller ponds in the southwestern part of Westminster, including Minott Pond, along Minott Road; Partridge Pond and Upper Reservoir, along Ellis Road; and Greenwood Pond and Burnt Mill Pond, along State Road West. These ponds provide a wide range of aquatic habitat and occur in areas with wetlands having many boreal characteristics (natural features found in northern regions). Wyman Pond and Round Meadow Pond are two waterbodies that show evidence of extensive

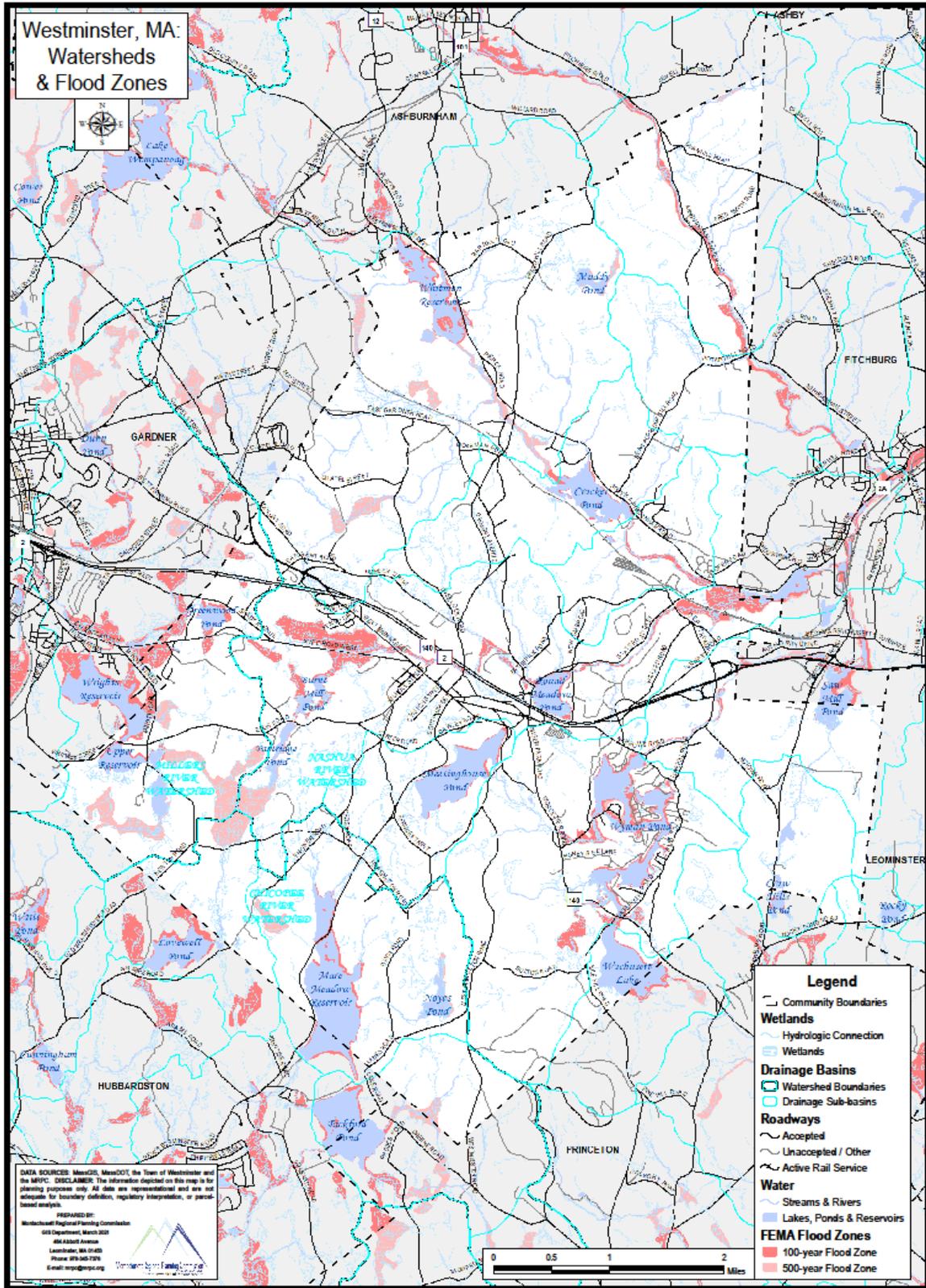
development, mostly small cottages, many of which have been converted to year-round residences. There is little open space remaining around these two ponds.

There are several large streams in Westminster. The most significant streams are the Whitman River and Phillips Brook, both of which are tributaries to the Nashua River. Other significant streams in the Nashua River watershed include Flag Brook, Wyman Brook, Round Meadow Pond Brook and Beech Hill Brook.









## WATERSHEDS

Westminster's land area falls within three major watersheds, as depicted on the Regional Context Map. The vast majority of Westminster's land (81%) falls within the Nashua River Watershed, followed by the Chicopee River Watershed (11.5%), and lastly the Millers River Watershed (7.5%).

The *1995 to 2020 Vision for the Nashua River Watershed* was developed by the Nashua River Watershed Association (NRWA) for the purpose of restoring and protecting water quality, conserving open spaces and encouraging well-planned development. This comprehensive plan listed numerous strategies to address growth, water quality issues, and land protection. The plan recommended actions to ensure that existing and potential drinking water resources were protected from contamination and policies to ensure that water supply withdrawals are balanced with water flows and aquifer capacity, so as not to deplete the resources. The plan also recommended strategies to clean up waters already polluted, through education and advocacy, best management practices for wastewater treatment, solid waste management, septic system management, and control of storm water runoff. Recommendations for land and water stewardship, conservation, and acquisition were also included in the plan. The NRWA has not updated this document since its initial publication.

In 2003, the Nashua River Watershed Association released the [Nashua River Watershed Five Year Action Plan 2003-2007](#). The plan was prepared by the former Massachusetts Watershed Initiative Nashua Team, a collaboration of watershed interests consisting of state and federal environmental agencies, municipal agencies, non-profit organizations, citizens, and other interested parties. The plan contains recommendations for the 32 watershed communities, covering such topics as stormwater management, improving water quality, open space preservation, growth management, education and recreation. The Westminster recommendations are primarily geared towards open space preservation, recreation and improvement of water quality. Unfortunately, this plan has not been updated since its publication and the Watershed Association has turned its focus on getting the Nashua River accepted into the federal Wild & Scenic Rivers Program.

## WATER QUALITY ASSESSMENTS

Under the Federal Clean Water Act (305b), the MA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is mandated to monitor, analyze, and report on the quality of statewide water resources to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the US Congress, and the public every two years. Waterbodies are rated into several categories based upon the federal goals and state determined standards of water quality. Under Section 303(d) of the Federal Clean Water Act, the State must submit a list of waters that are not meeting their water quality standards to EPA for review and approval every two years.

The Fitchburg D.P.W. – Division of Water Supply, under the terms of its Water Management Act (WMA) Permit (Permit # 9P-2-08-097.01, dated November 22, 2010), is authorized to withdraw up to 0.77 million gallons per day (MGD) from the Chicopee River Basin on average over the course of any year. The City's reservoirs which are in the Chicopee River Basin are Mare Meadow Reservoir and Bickford Pond Reservoir. In addition, the City's WMA Permit also authorizes the

withdrawal of up to 824 million gallons per year (2.26 MGD average) from Mare Meadow Reservoir as “recognition for normal variation for existing withdrawals” in accordance with 310 CMR 36.39. This inter-basin transfer of water from the Chicopee to the Nashua River Basin is grandfathered since it existed prior to the implementation of the Inter-Basin Transfer Act (IBT) (LeVangie 2001).

Over the past two calendar years (2018 and 2019), the total withdrawal was 789,994,000 gallons (1.08 MGD average) from Mare Meadow Reservoir to Meetinghouse Reservoir, which is the terminal reservoir to the Regional Water Filtration Plant. No water was transferred from Bickford Reservoir (which is pumped to Mare Meadow Reservoir) in 2018, 159.4 million gallons was transferred in 2019.

The MA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is obligated to establish total maximum daily loads (TMDL’s) for parameters of concern and establish pollution control strategies to restore the waters to meet water quality standards. A TMDL is a calculation of the maximum amount of a pollutant that a waterbody can receive and still meet water quality standards, and an allocation of that amount to the pollutant's sources. This TMDL is directed at control of excessive algae and weeds, which limit most uses of the waterbody, including swimming, fishing, and boating. All of the pollutants and stressors are indicators of nutrient enriched systems, indicating eutrophication. In freshwater systems, phosphorus is the primary nutrient of concern. The TMDL reports establish a phosphorus limit for each lake and outline corrective actions to achieve that goal. Issues addressed include Title 5 compliance, Phase II Stormwater permitting issues, sewer management, maintenance of roads, lake management issues, and compliance with the Wetlands Protection Act.

The State DEP has prepared TMDL reports for all three of Westminister’s watersheds (Nashua River Watershed 2007, Chicopee River Watershed 2006, and the Millers River Watershed 2003). The Millers River TMDL report identified three impaired waterbodies in Westminister: Greenwood Pond, Minott Pond and Wright’s Reservoir, the impediment for all three being noxious aquatic plants. It should be noted that these reports have not been updated since their publication.

Additionally, DEP’s most recent Water Quality Assessment Report for Massachusetts (2016) identified three Westminister waterbodies as being impaired for fish and aquatic wildlife due to the presence of non-native aquatic plants: Partridge Pond, Sawmill Pond and Wyman Pond. It should be noted that Crocker Pond was on the 2012 list of impaired waterbodies, but has since been removed.

## FLOODPLAINS

The Town’s floodplains have been mapped by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and are depicted on the Town’s Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRM), published in 1982. It should be noted that FEMA is in the process of re-mapping floodplains across the State, but this effort has not yet reached Westminister. According to the FEMA maps, Westminister has 2,411 acres of land residing in floodplains (1,770 acres in 100-year floodplains and 641 acres in 500-year floodplains), or 10.6% of the Town’s total land area.

Most of the Town's floodplains are confined near streams and waterbodies by steep slopes. The extensive areas of floodplain are primarily confined within or close to large wetlands. Route 140 floods at the Gatehouse Road corner over the culvert that empties Wachusett Lake into Wyman Pond, due to inadequate flow through the culvert. According to the Town's Director of Public Works, there are no other known areas of chronic flooding in Westminister.

## WETLANDS

Wetlands are widespread and extensive in Westminister. The wetlands depicted on the Water Resources Map come from the National Wetland Inventory Map prepared by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. This map shows the larger wetland areas, however, there are many more smaller wetlands scattered throughout Town. All told, there are approximately 1,840 acres of wetlands in Westminister, or 8.1% of the Town's total land area. However, the true amount of wetlands is likely much higher, due to the fact that the National Wetlands Inventory often misses some of the smaller wetlands in Town.

There are a wide variety of wetland types occurring in Westminister. Forested wetlands dominated by red maple are the most typical. There are many forested wetlands which have boreal characteristics and are dominated by spruce, balsam fir and tamarack. These are most extensive in the southwestern portion of Town. There is also an Atlantic white cedar swamp at the southern end of the Cedar Swamp at Minott Road. This is possibly the only Atlantic white cedar swamp in northern Worcester County. There are also many large, very wet shrub swamps and bogs. The boggy areas are most numerous along the edges of ponds. Most of the bogs in Westminister are not truly bogs and would best be classified as fens.

Marshes are not abundant in Westminister. Where they do exist, they appear as small areas within other wetland types. The most significant marsh occurs within High Ridge Wildlife Management Area along East Gardner Road. In addition, the Tophet Swamp which was once heavily forested is rapidly converting to a marsh due to flooding from beavers and the improper reconstruction of Route 2A.

Aquifers occur in Westminister in a few locations. These areas are confined to deep glacial outwash deposits. The most extensive aquifers occur in the Whitman River valley, around Wyman Pond, along Phillips Brook and near Partridge Pond and Burnt Millpond. The aquifers in Town can also be seen on the Water Resources Map.

## D. VEGETATION

Almost all of Westminister is forested. Most of the forests are typical of the Transition Hardwood zone where there is an intermingling of forest types typical of the more southern oak/hickory forests with the more northern spruce/fir and northern hardwood types.

The most common forest type within Westminister is the white pine/red oak/red maple type. Other common stand types include white pine, hemlock, white pine/hemlock, hemlock/yellow birch, red spruce/balsam fir, sugar maple/beech/yellow birch, black cherry/maple, red maple, red oak, gray birch/red maple, aspen and paper birch.



As would be anticipated the more southerly forest types dominated by oaks are best developed at the lower elevations. The more northerly forest types such as sugar maple/beech/yellow birch are most common in the northern half of Westminster. Surprisingly, the most northerly of the forest types, red spruce/balsam fir, is most common in the southwestern portion of Town, in the area from Knowler Road west to Gardner. As most of Westminster is forested, the forests are almost all contiguous, broken only by narrow roads. The only significant break in the continuity of the

forest is Route 2. The least populated, least divided, piece of forest land is the area between South Ashburnham Road and Route 12. A small portion of this area is publicly owned, but most is private. Much of this area is classified under Chapters 61 (forestry) and 61A (farming), which is the State's reduced taxation program for land actively used for forestry and farming.

While there are only a few large-scale farms in Westminster (e.g., the Jarvenpaa farm on North Common Road, Sunny Knoll Farm on Dean Hill Road, and Otter Farms on Lanes Road), there are numerous small-scale operations that qualify as farming and/or agriculture. As of 2014, there were 46 small-scale active farming/agricultural operations in Westminster. For a graphic depiction of Westminster's active farms, please review the Active Farmland Map that follows Page 20.

The MA Division of Fisheries and Wildlife has mapped three Priority Habitat Areas within Westminster. Priority Habitat Areas often include habitat for rare species, but also may include exemplary habitats. The Priority Habitat Areas mapped in Westminster include Cedar Swamp between Minott and Ellis Roads, the marsh and adjacent uplands along East Gardner Road in the High Ridge Wildlife Management Area, a portion of Wachusett Mountain, and along the stream on Potato Hill Road and Ashburnham State Road.

In terms of public shade trees, there is a minimal amount in Westminster's public spaces. Within the village center, what few shade trees exist are located on private property. While there are no public shade trees within the Main Street right-of-way through the Village Center, Westminster residents did express the desire to see public shade trees integrated into a re-designed Main Street during the Village Center Design Workshop held in 2014 as part of the Town's Master Planning process. Public shade trees did exist in the Village Center in the past, but they were removed in the 1970s. The Board of Selectmen and Public Works Commissioners are currently reviewing options for funding a re-design plan for Main Street that will eventually be placed on the Regional Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP).

## E. FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE

Westminster supports a variety of both warm and cold water fisheries. There are many shallow ponds and lakes supporting species such as hornpout, bluegills, yellow perch and chain pickerel. The larger lakes with colder water support bass and white sucker. The larger streams support populations of both stocked and native brook trout, along with white sucker.

With large areas of forest, Westminster is inhabited by many large mammals. Moose, white-tailed deer, coyote, red and gray fox, opossum, woodchuck, beaver, muskrat, porcupine, raccoon, fisher, long-tailed weasels, ermine, skunks, river otter and bobcat are all abundant. Westminster is in an area with the highest density of fisher population anywhere in the species range. There are also occasional reports of black bear. Many smaller mammals also reside in Westminster in a variety of habitats. The most common small mammals include shrews, moles, bats, cottontails, snowshoe hares, chipmunks, bats, gray, red and flying squirrels, mice, voles and mink.

The extensive wetlands in Westminster provide significant habitat for many species of amphibians and reptiles. Red-spotted newts, spring peepers, many species of frogs, turtles, and water snakes all inhabit Westminster's lakes, pond, streams and wetlands. Terrestrial amphibians and reptiles which are common include red-backed salamanders, toads, wood turtles and a variety of snakes.



Westminster's open space supports a large and diverse bird life. The extensive forests are habitat for many species of both resident nesting and migratory birds. The many lakes and ponds provide habitat during migration for many species of waterfowl including mergansers, bufflehead, goldeneyes, scaup, grebes, cormorants and loons. Waterbodies also provide breeding sites for mallards, black ducks, and wood ducks, and many have the potential to support breeding loons. Marsh birds such as rails and bitterns are typically only found in the marsh along East Gardner Road in the High Ridge Wildlife

Management Area. Birds of prey are abundant in Westminster. The large areas of forest provide habitat for owls and many species of hawks. In addition, the ridge of hills in central Massachusetts is a significant migration flyway for hawks. During the course of migration, virtually every species of hawk occurring in the eastern part of the country will be observed in Westminster. The populations of woodland birds (including many of the neo-tropical migrants supposedly in decline) have and are increasing significantly due to the historic conversion of farmland to forest. Conversely, species requiring fields and edge have undergone significant population declines.

Wildlife corridors occur on either side of the Town's major rivers and streams, particularly the Whitman River, Phillips Brook, Flag Brook, Wyman Brook, Round Meadow Pond Brook and Beech Hill Brook. A land-based wildlife corridor occurs in the north of Town between Bragg Hill Road and Bean Porridge Hill Road, an area characterized by large swaths of undeveloped land, including Muddy Pond and its permanently protected shoreline.

## BIO MAP 2

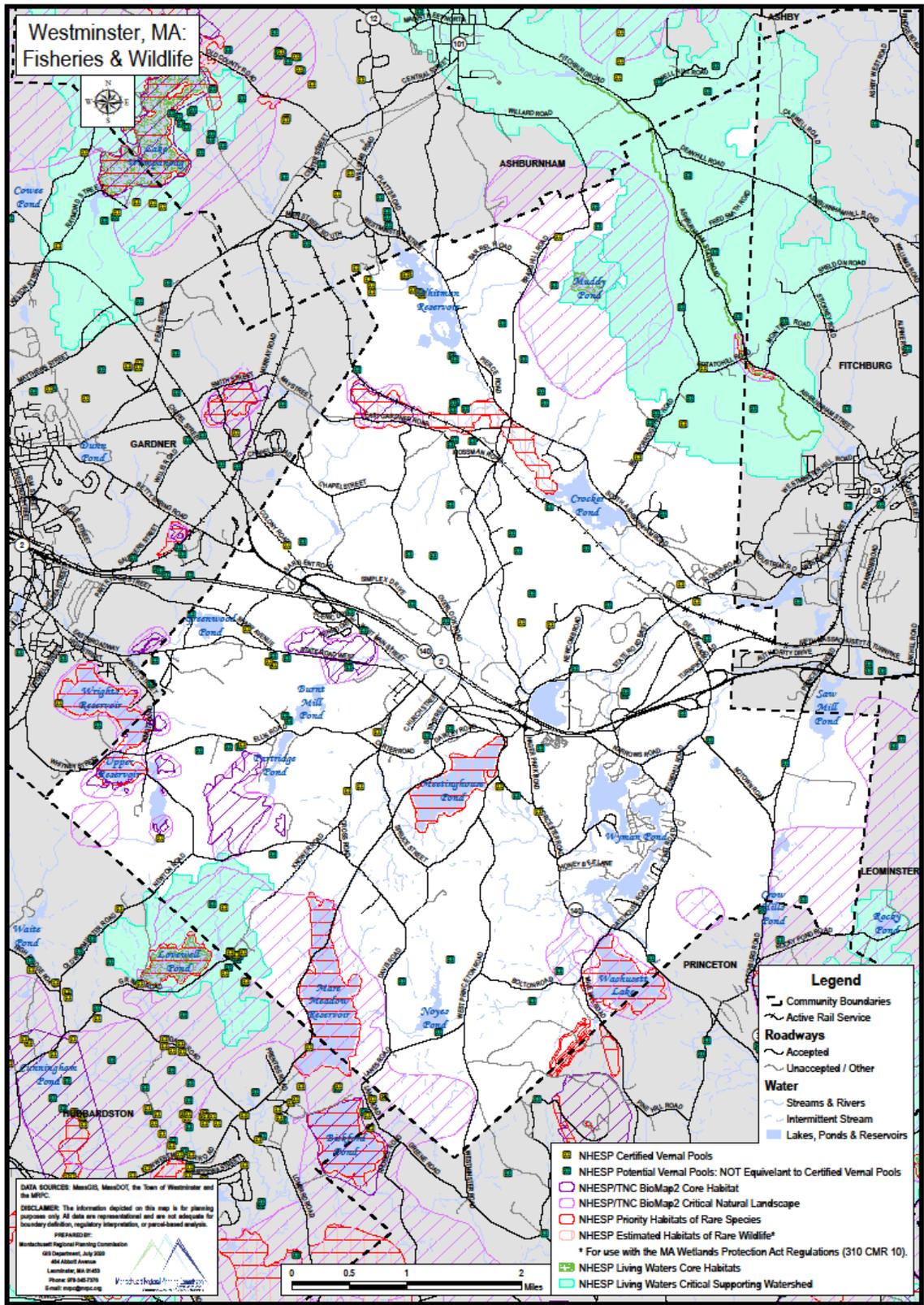
In 2012, the MA Department of Fish and Game completed an update of the State’s critical habitat areas as part of its Bio Map 2 initiative. The first Bio Map initiative was completed back in 2001. The Bio Map program is administered by the Department’s Division of Fisheries and Wildlife’s Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. The program maps two types of habitat: Core Habitats (areas that are critical for the long-term persistence of rare species and species of conservation concern) and Critical Natural Landscapes (large contiguous blocks of land minimally impacted by development). This initiative also mapped what the State considers to be its “Living Waters”, i.e. those lakes, ponds, rivers and streams that should have the highest priority for freshwater biodiversity conservation in Massachusetts. MA Fish & Game also maintains a running list of rare and endangered species based on field observations. Table 16 below presents the most recent listing of rare and endangered species in Westminster.

*Table 15 - Rare and Endangered Species Found in Westminster*

<b>Group</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>	<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Most Recent Observation</b>
Vascular Plant	Ophioglossum pusillum	Adder's Tongue Fern	T	2017
Bird	Botaurus lentiginosus	American Bittern	E	2007
Vascular Plant	Crepidomanes intricatum	Appalachian Bristle-fern	E	2018
Vascular Plant	Potamogeton confervoides	Tuckerman's Pondweed	T	2009
Mussel	Strophitus undulatus	Creeper	SC	1999
Bird	Haliaeetus leucocephalus	Bald Eagle	T	2018
Bird	Gavia immer	Common Loon	SC	2018
Reptile	Glyptemys insculpta	Wood Turtle	SC	2012
Vascular Plant	Ophioglossum pusillum	Adder's Tongue Fern	T	2017

Key: T = threatened, E = endangered, SC = Special Concern.

Source: MA Department of Fish & Game, 2020.



## F. SCENIC RESOURCES & UNIQUE FEATURES

The MA Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) administers the State's Heritage Landscape Inventory Program. Heritage Landscapes are those special places and spaces that help define the character of your community and reflect its past. Such landscapes are the result of human interaction with the natural resources of an area, which influence the use and development of land. These geographic areas contain both natural and cultural resources. The Massachusetts Landscape Inventory lists the Wachusett Mountain Unit as a significant landscape feature in the Westminister area. This mountain is a prominent and beautiful landform that offers both aesthetic and recreational richness to Westminister.

Throughout the Town's history, Wachusett has been the scene of regional significance and a source of cultural identity. Three hotel facilities have graced the top of Wachusett. The last was closed shortly after World War II and after years of decay was destroyed by fire in 1970. These hotels served as summer retreats to the rich and famous of eastern Massachusetts. Today a fire lookout tower, picnic and overlook areas and a shallow, rock lined pond are all that remain.

A study by David Foster of Harvard University recognizes an old growth forest with trees in excess of 300 years old on the northwestern hillside of Mount Wachusett. This study identified approximately 300 acres as Old Growth Forest in both Westminister and Princeton. The section of Mount Wachusett from the auto road up contains the Old Growth Forest.

Wachusett or Wajuset "the great hill" was named by the Native Americans hundreds of years ago. There are many educational hikes and walks that are sponsored on Mount Wachusett including: nature hikes, Old Growth Forest identification, bird walks, hawk watching, vernal pool identification, history walks, children's story hour, junior ranger program, and other outreach programs.

## G. ENVIRONMENTAL FEATURES

There are several unique and important open space habitats in Westminister:

### *1. The large forested area between South Ashburnham Road and Route 12*

This is an area about two miles wide by over three miles in length that is broken by only a couple of lightly populated roads. This area provides habitat for a wide variety of forest species and contains many wetlands including large swamps, Muddy Pond and Phillips Brook. Much of this area has soils with exposed or shallow bedrock. Portions of this forested block are owned by the Westminister Conservation Commission and the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), formerly the Department of Environmental Management (DEM), however, most of the land is privately held. A significant portion of the land is classified under either Chapters 61 or 61A, as are most of the abutting properties to the north in Ashburnham.

### *2. Whitman River Valley*

The Whitman River, its two associated reservoirs, Whitman Reservoir and Crocker Pond, and the surrounding land is a unique area combining riverine, deep water lake, wetland and upland habitats. This area is further unique in that there has been little development near the water resources, yet it is privately owned. This area has the potential to provide a plethora of recreational activities, both passive and active.

### *3. Boreal wetland/upland systems in the southwest portion of Town*

The area west of Knower Road and south of Route 2 contains many forest stands and wetlands with boreal-like characteristics. There are extensive areas of red spruce and balsam fir, large boggy wetlands, and many ponds. Some of these resources are on DCR land, but most are privately owned. Cedar Swamp, due to its high elevation, is tributary to three different watersheds; the Millers, Nashua and Ware Rivers. Cedar Swamp is mapped by the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife as a Priority Habitat Area.

### *4. Fitchburg Reservoirs*

Mare Meadow Reservoir, Meetinghouse Pond and Wachusett Lake are part of Fitchburg and Westminister's water supply system. These are deep-water lakes surrounded by forest. The waterbodies and the surrounding areas are owned by the City of Fitchburg. Due to the long history of public ownership, there has essentially been no development near these lakes. These areas provide a unique scenic resource for the Town as these areas are pristine, undisturbed lakes. The reservoirs and the surrounding areas have the potential to provide a significant amount of passive recreation such as shore fishing, hiking, birding and cross-country skiing; however, only a limited area is open to the public, and only for shore fishing. No other entry onto their lands is allowed and they vigorously enforce their no trespassing rules.

### *5. Fitchburg/Westminster Landfill*

The landfill on Route 31 is a unique, albeit unlikely, habitat. The landfill is a large open area with a plentiful food supply for wildlife, and attracts a variety of bird species. Many gulls are attracted to the landfill. In addition to the more common herring, ring-billed and great black-backed gulls, vagrant species such as Iceland, Glaucous and probably lesser black-backed gulls are often found at the landfill during the winter. These species used to be found more frequently at inland locations, however, the closure of most of the landfills has significantly reduced their occurrence. The Fitchburg/Westminster landfill is one of the few landfills in the area. Unfortunately, from a bird habitat perspective, the landfill has implemented gull control measures to keep the gull population down and to prevent contamination of nearby Notown Reservoir. As a result, the occurrence of the rarer gulls has been reduced. The landfill is also frequented by many birds of prey and scavenging turkey vultures. Hawks and owls have been observed hunting over the landfill. As portions of the landfill are closed and planted with grass, the area of open, low quality grassland is gradually increasing. This is the only location in Westminister where this habitat type is found. Grasslands with low, sparse grass are the habitat for many species which occur in no other habitat, and these species are rare and declining in the northeast. These species include grasshopper and vesper sparrows, upland sandpipers and meadowlarks. The landfill, therefore, has the long-term potential to provide habitat for these rare bird species.

### *6. Crow Hills*

The Crow Hills are a unique scenic and recreational resource. This ridge of hills has some beautiful rock cliffs. These cliffs are utilized by rock climbers from throughout the region. Fortunately, Crow Hills are almost entirely owned by the DCR, and are well protected.

### 7. *High Ridge Wildlife Management Area*

High Ridge Wildlife Management Area is owned and managed by the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. The area contains a wide diversity of habitats including large fields, marshes and forests. This area is managed and utilized for a wide variety of uses including agriculture, silviculture, hunting, birding, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, hiking and dog trails. This area is well protected and managed by the state and no further actions are necessary.

### 8. *Wachusett Mountain*

Wachusett Mountain, owned by the DCR, is the feature which dominates the landscape. The mountain is a significant local and regional scenic and recreational resource. Wachusett Mountain is extensively utilized for many activities including skiing, biking and hiking. In addition to its summit that invites picnickers and sightseers, Wachusett Mountain offers hundreds of acres of steep terrain that is used extensively for hiking and skiing. It is mostly wooded and has abundant rock outcroppings that are used for prospects.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

Westminster is typical of most small rural towns in Massachusetts in that it has a few site-specific environmental issues (mostly erosion at construction sites), but nothing widespread.

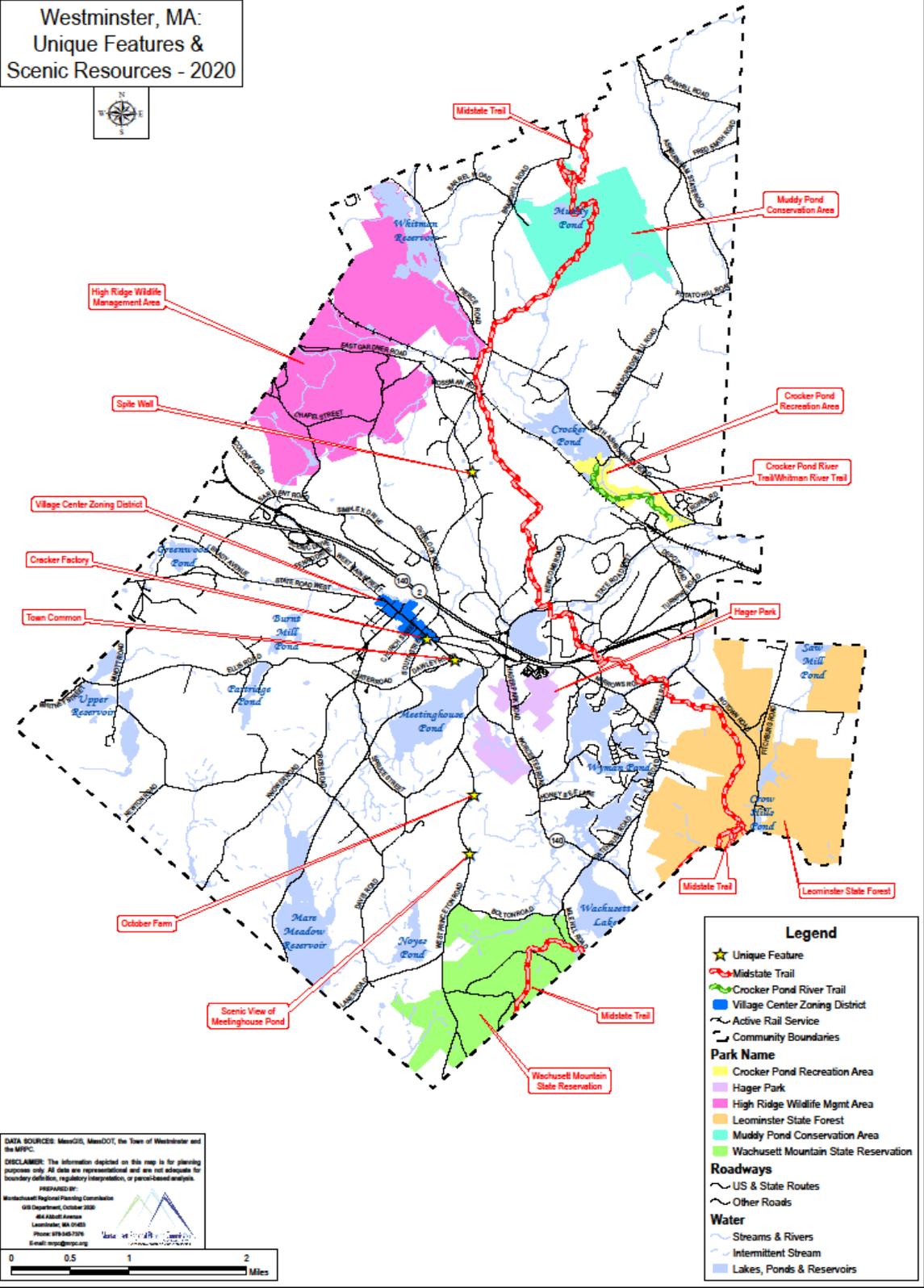
## GROUND AND SURFACE WATER POLLUTION

Ground and surface water pollution are not widespread problems. Non-point source pollution is likely a greater problem than point source pollution. The areas around Wyman Pond and Partridge Pond are densely populated with many houses still being served by septic systems. These septic systems are often quite old, were designed for seasonal and not year-round use, are in or near the water table and are located in coarse sand and gravel deposits. The majority of houses along Wyman Pond and Partridge Pond are still serviced by individual septic systems. Many properties in this area have been the subject of extensive Title 5 updates and improvements as properties have changed ownership over the last decade. The Wyman Lake Association has retained the firm Aquatic Control, Inc. to perform water quality testing and control of invasive species. Recent reports have shown that the health of Wyman's Pond continues to improve.

## SOLID AND HAZARDOUS WASTE SITES

According to the DEP's most recent listing of hazard waste release sites (known commonly as "21E" sites), there have been 92 hazardous waste releases at 47 locations in Westminster since the DEP started tracking releases in 1994. However, since the last iteration of this Plan (2013), there have only been 22 hazardous waste releases at 9 sites. A hazardous waste release can be as minor as gas spilled due to an automobile accident at an intersection, to major releases requiring years of clean-up.

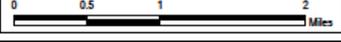
Westminster, MA:  
Unique Features &  
Scenic Resources - 2020



**DATA SOURCES:** MassGIS, MassDOT, the Town of Westminster and the MPFC.

**DISCLAIMER:** The information depicted on this map is for planning purposes only. All data are representational and are not adequate for boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel-based analysis.

**PREPARED BY:**  
Westminster Digital Planning Collaborative  
GIS Department, October 2020  
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Leicester, MA 01525  
Phone: 978-683-1019  
Email: mpfc@wpfc.org



**Legend**

- ★ Unique Feature
- Midstate Trail
- Crocker Pond River Trail
- Village Center Zoning District
- Active Rail Service
- Community Boundaries

**Park Name**

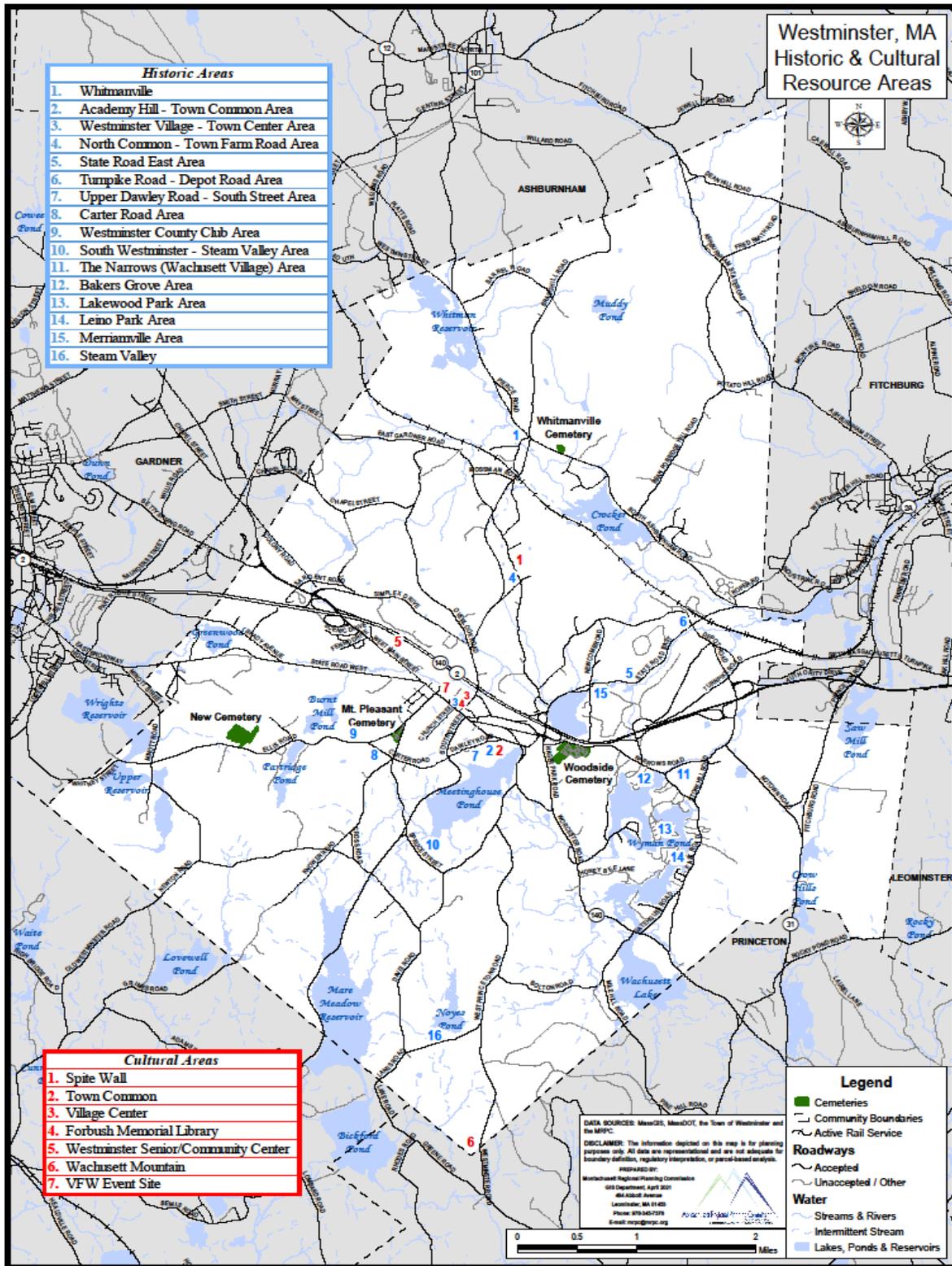
- Crocker Pond Recreation Area
- Hager Park
- High Ridge Wildlife Mgmt Area
- Leominster State Forest
- Muddy Pond Conservation Area
- Wachusett Mountain State Reservation

**Roadways**

- US & State Routes
- Other Roads

**Water**

- Streams & Rivers
- Intermittent Stream
- Lakes, Ponds & Reservoirs



Only three properties in Westminster have active use limitations due to prior contamination: 1) 100 Simplex Drive, which is the site of the old Digital Equipment manufacturing site; 2) 78 Main Street, which is home to F&M Auto Service; and 3) the Mobil gas station at 21 Village Road. All three sites are currently in the Phase IV cleanup stage, meaning that the cleanup is still in progress.

In terms of solid waste, a Solid Waste Drop-Off Center was opened in 2006 at 165 Fitchburg Road/Route 31 for the use by Town residents only. The Drop-Off Center is owned and operated by Resource Control Inc. (RCI) a.k.a. Waste Management. RCI is responsible for enforcing all waste bans on disposal and transfer of municipal solid waste that are adopted by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. Throughout the duration of RCI's operations at the Fitchburg-Westminster Landfill, RCI will transfer from the Drop-Off Center all collected Town acceptable solid waste for disposal at no cost. Homeowners also have the option of arranging for curbside pickup for a fee through private waste disposal companies. The Town pays RCI a monthly fee to operate the Drop-Off Center. In addition, the Town is not charged for the curbside collection of recyclables from residential properties throughout the duration of RCI's landfilling operations at the Fitchburg-Westminster Landfill. The estimated date for the closure of the Fitchburg-Westminster Landfill is 2026, at which point the Drop-Off Center will be turned over to the Town. It should be noted that the landfill site has been responsible for 22 hazardous waste releases since DEP started tracking such releases back in 1994.

## EARTHWORK, SUBSURFACE DISPOSAL, AND SEPTIC SYSTEMS/WELLS

The Town's Earth Removal Bylaw was substantially revised in 2020, expanding the setback and buffer requirements for earth removal and placement of fill projects. The Planning Board has subsequently adopted a new set of regulations governing earth removal and the placement of fill.

Under Chapters 245, 254 and 255 of the Westminster code, the Board of Health grants permits for the construction of septic systems and wells. The Board of Health revised its well regulations in 2018. The Planning Board requires that all land divisions that go through the Approval Not Required (ANR) process be reviewed by the Board of Health to make sure that any lots having existing dwellings on them meet the State's Title V regulations.

## EROSION, FLOODING & IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT

Erosion has become a problem at individual sites throughout Town during and after construction projects. While the Planning Board retains a professional engineer to inspect subdivisions and large scale commercial and industrial projects, many small projects have fallen through the cracks, mostly individual building lots that are created through the Approval Not Required (ANR) process.

Sedimentation has been a periodic and temporary problem at large-scale sites under development, particularly after rain events. The Town's Conservation Agent routinely inspects large-scale development projects after heavy rain event. The Agent has noted erosion and sedimentation issues in some instances. The Agent notifies the developer and, in most instances, these issues are quickly addressed.

The EPA noted the issues of erosion and sedimentation when the Town attempted to renew its MS-4 Stormwater Management in 2018. The Town addressed these issues by adopting a Low Impact Development (LID) bylaw and Stormwater Management bylaw in June of 2020. The Planning Board subsequently adopted regulations to go with both bylaws. The Town's new Stormwater Management Program now works as follows: For projects that will disturb between 10,000 square feet and an acre of land, they will be subject to the Low Impact Development, bylaw and regulations. Our Conservation Agent will review plans for LID compliance. For projects disturbing over an acre of land, they will be subject to the new Stormwater bylaw and regulations. The Planning Board's consulting engineer will review plans for compliance with the new Stormwater bylaw/regulations, at the expense of the developer.

While erosion and sedimentation are negative impacts of new development, the most prominent impacts have been the loss of farmland and forestland to new development. The University of Massachusetts-Amherst has mapped the State's land use changes over the years, and the numbers for Westminster indicate a significant loss of farmland and forestry to new development, as Table 16 below clearly indicates. This situation has continued into the new century as documented by Mass Audubon's "Losing Ground" reports.

Table 16  
Westminster Land Use Changes Over the Years

1971	1985	% Change 71 – 85	1999	% Change 85 - 99	% Change 71 - 99
2,396 developed acres	3,183 developed acres	+ 32.8%	3,892 developed acres	+ 22.3%	+62.4%
1,685 acres residential	2,163 acres residential	+ 28.4%	2,717 acres residential	+ 25.6%	+61.2%
454 acres comm./ind.	661 acres comm./ind.	+ 45.6%	711 acres comm./ind.	+7.6%	+56.6%
257 institutional	359 acres institutional	+39.7%	464 institutional	+29.2%	+80.5%
18,080 acres forestland	17,390 acres forestland	- 3.8%	16,657 forestland	-4.2%	-7.9%
1,166 acres farmland	1,103 acres farmland	- 5.4%	992 acres farmland	- 10.0%	-14.9%

Source: UMass-Amherst land use data for 1971, 1985 and 1999.

In terms of flooding, there is one site with documented flooding problems: this is Route 140 in the vicinity of Wyman's Pond where an undersized culvert has resulted in the road partially washing out during heavy rain events. This issue will be addressed as part of the State's reconstruction of Route 140.

## FORESTRY

There are no significant forestry issues in Westminster. There is a forest cutting plan in place for Hager Park and that is the only significant forest under the Town's ownership. It should be noted that the Town has seen a handful of parcels used for forestry that have been withdrawn from the State's reduced taxation program for forestry (Chapter 61) and subsequently converted into residential use. The Conservation Commission has cutting plans in place for the backside of Muddy Pond and on the parcels it owns in the eastern part of Town near the intersection of Route 2A and South Ashburnham Road.

## ENVIRONMENTAL EQUITY

There are numerous pieces of permanently protected land scattered throughout Town, so much so that the majority of Westminster residents can find at least one open space area within a mile of their residence. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the Town's recreation resources, which are mostly clustered within the Village Center, except for the Crocker Pond Recreation Area. The Town's Parks and Recreation Commission has identified the need for additional ball-field space and, by necessity, these areas are likely to be located outside of the Village Center.

## WETLANDS AND RIVERS PROTECTION

Under *M. G. L. c. 131, s. 40*, the Conservation Commission reviews Notices of Intent filed for work that will involve the removal, fill, dredging, or altering of land within or bordering resource areas as defined in more detail by the statute. The Conservation Commission makes a determination as to whether work proposed in the 100-foot wetlands buffer zone is significant to the following: the public or private water supply, the groundwater supply, flood control, stormwater drainage, prevention of pollution, protection of land containing shellfish, protection of wildlife habitat and protection of fisheries. At the Annual Town Meeting in May 2004, a local Wetlands Bylaw was approved. The Wetlands Bylaw augments the Conservation Commission's review powers established under the Wetlands Protection Act. The local bylaw, among other things, sets a 25-foot "no-disturb zone" from the 100-foot wetlands buffer zone, provides for 150% replication of destroyed wetlands, provides for more stringent protection of vernal pools, and sets penalties for wetlands violations.

In addition, under the provisions of *Chapter 258 of the Acts of 1996*, the Conservation Commission also reviews work proposed within a 200-foot-wide corridor extending on both sides of a perennial river or stream, as measured from the mean annual high-water line of the river. These riverfront areas may contain wetlands, floodplains, and upland. Projects in riverfront areas are reviewed to ensure that the riverfront is protected with regard to the eight interests outlined above. The law also establishes the policy of the state to protect the natural integrity of rivers and to encourage and establish open space along rivers.

## HISTORICAL RESOURCES

As described in the *Town of Westminster Historic Preservation Plan of 1998*, historic and cultural resources are the tangible, surviving properties and sites that resulted from the activities of people who lived and worked in the Town in the past. These resources, combined with the town's natural beauty give Westminster its unique sense of place.

In an effort to document other significant historic resources which deserve recognition and protection, the Historical Commission is now surveying all properties and sites that are at least 100 years old. This survey will be a critical resource to help determine the significance of land parcels being considered for open space. *The Town of Westminster Historic Preservation Plan of 1998* addresses these issues in detail and is a vital guide for the Historical Commission's work program and the town's planning efforts.

The Westminster Village/Academy Hill Historic District are listed in the State and National Register of Historic Places. Easily observed from numerous roads and/or trails are stone walls made by farmers to delineate boundaries and to clear land. Foundations of former gristmills can be found along streams as can handsomely crafted rock bridges and canals. Westminster's cemeteries, trails, and dams also represent significant aspects of the Town's character.

The Town received a grant from DCR and Freedom's Way Heritage Association (FWHA) to inventory the town's Heritage Landscapes, which resulted in the Westminster Reconnaissance Report, in June of 2006.

## OTHER OPEN SPACE RESOURCES

### Scenic Roads and Trails (including unpaved roads)

Midstate Trail  
Academy Hill Road  
Bean Porridge Hill Road (unpaved section vicinity Potato Hill Road)  
Barrel Road (unpaved section)  
Bragg Hill Road  
Curtis Road  
Dawley Road  
Stone Hill Road  
Notown Road  
Davis Road  
Foster Street  
West Princeton Road  
Minott Road  
Lanes Road  
Frog Hollow Road

### Scenic Views From Upper Elevations

Academy Hill views to Northeast, South and West directions  
Bean Porridge Hill Road south/southwest  
Dean Hill Road south/southwest  
Crow Hill north to Stone Hill Road  
Bolton Road south to Mt. Wachusett  
Lafortune property, West Princeton Road, south/southeast to Mt. Wachusett  
West Princeton Road north/northwest across Meetinghouse Pond  
View of Mount Wachusett from the Common

### Historic Areas

Whitmanville  
Academy Hill - Town Common Area  
Westminster Village - Town Center Area  
North Common - Town Farm Road Area  
State Road East Area  
Turnpike Road - Depot Road Area  
Upper Dawley Road - South Street Area

Carter Road Area  
Westminster County Club Area  
South Westminster - Steam Valley Area  
The Narrows (Wachusett Village) Area  
Bakers Grove Area  
Lakewood Park Area  
Leino Park Area  
Merriamville Area  
Steam Valley (Spruce Road and Old Hubbardston Road – site of Merriam Chair Factory.)

Historic Archeological Sites

South Westminster - Steam Valley Area  
Abner Miles headstone – off Colony Road  
General area bounded by Syd Smith Road, Bathrick Road, and railroad right-of-way, including colonial-period roadways now abandoned, railroad underpass, train depot, and historic archaeological sites  
Cowee Homestead site  
Goddard Saw and Grist Mill site  
Pioneer Properties (Westminster Business Park) site  
Brooks Saw Mill site  
Lord's Barn site  
Wachusett Park (street railway amusement park) ruins  
Schoolhouse sites (2)

Cultural Areas

Spite Wall  
Town Common  
Village Center  
Forbush Memorial Library  
Westminster Senior/Community Center  
Wachusett Mountain  
VFW Event Site

**CRITICAL ISSUES**

Critical issues are town-wide issues that are not linked to a particular place.

- Loss off Agricultural Land and Farms
- Documentation of Historic Structures
- Protection of Scenic Roads

## PRIORITY HERITAGE

Priority landscapes are those landscapes that were determined at the community meeting to be of greatest concern. They are significant, valued by the community and not permanently protected.

- Ponds: Round Meadow Pond, Crocker Pond, Town Pond, and Cedar Swamp
- Midstate Trail
- Hager Park
- Honey Bee Lane
- Undiscovered Ecosystems
- Academy Hill-Westminster Village: National Historic District
- The Narrows- Industrial Area (Wachusettville)
- Maple Heights – Howard Road
- Cowee Farm and Hill – Bean Porridge Hill Road
- Savilampi Farm – South Ashburnham Road
- Van Hazinga Farm- Ashburnham State Road (Route 12)
- Spite Wall
- Wachusett Mountain Old Growth Forests
- Wachusett Park by Wachusett Reservoir
- All ancient burial sites
- South Westminster chair-making sites (Steam Valley – Spruce Road)
- Whitmanville
- Westminster Cracker Factory
- Rambler Recreation Area
- Whitney Homestead
- Gardner State Hospital (old farm properties taken by the State)

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## SECTION 5 – INVENTORY OF LANDS OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION INTEREST

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There are numerous types of land that are vital components of Westminster's open space. In addition to State and federal lands used as regional parks and forests, municipal land used as neighborhood parks and land owned by the Conservation Commission, areas such as cemeteries, private recreation and conservation land, agricultural lands and private woodlands contribute to the total open land and rural character of Westminster. For these reasons all of these land parcels are considered in this section.

The degrees of protection these parcels enjoy also vary. While some parcels are protected in perpetuity, others are protected for a limited time period and are at risk of being developed if sufficient pressure or cause is given to the owner. Still others are totally unprotected and can easily and quickly be developed. It is crucial to consider how unprotected land contributes to the way the community looks and where recreation takes place.

The following is an inventory of the parcels considered to be valuable open land in the Town of Westminster. They are divided into three categories: Protected public conservation and recreation land, unprotected public land, and unprotected private land including Chapter 61 Lands that have temporary restrictions.

The protection of open land is important for many reasons. Uncontrolled growth can result in degradation of public drinking water sources, traffic congestion, inefficient delivery of government services, and destruction of wildlife habitat, destruction of unique scenic and historic resources, human stress, shoddy construction, and carpetbagger development. There are also economic costs associated with growth. Numerous cost-of-community-service studies prepared by the American Farmland Trust have proven that residential development requires more in service costs than it pays in taxes (see Appendix A to review the Farmland Trust's fact sheet on the municipal cost of various types of development).

Preservation of open space has natural, social, and psychological benefits. Open land provides visual relief from the developed landscape. Vegetation helps filter out pollutants from air, rain water, and runoff. Vegetation also mitigates temperature extremes. Trees especially help reduce air pollution through the process of transpiration. Open space provides habitat for animal and bird species, and can be used for active or passive recreation, including baseball, soccer, walking, hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, swimming, and nature study.

### A. PROTECTED PUBLIC CONSERVATION AND RECREATION LAND

The protected public recreation and conservation land in Westminster is comprised of State Forests, Wildlife Management Areas, Land Trust Properties, Conservation Areas, land owned by the cities of Fitchburg and Gardner for the purpose of protecting public water supplies, two properties protected under the State's Agricultural Protection Program (APR), several cemeteries, a Town Park, a small piece of protected land within the Westminster Business Park and a Town Common.

Taken together, Westminster has 7,610 acres of permanently protected land, or 31.9% of the Town’s total land area. A spreadsheet depicting all of the Town’s tax-exempt and partially tax-exempt parcels can be found in Appendix B. It should be noted that not all tax-exempt parcels are considered “permanently protected”.

The table below describes the larger conservation and recreation properties in Town.

*Table 17 - Protected Public Recreation and Conservation Land*

<b>Land Parcel</b>	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Manager</b>	<b>Uses</b>	<b>Zoning</b>
Leominster State Forest	State	DCR	Hiking, bicycling, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, fishing, swimming, picnicking, rock-climbing	R-II
Wachusett Mountain State Reservation	State	DCR	Hiking, cross-country skiing, fishing, swimming, picnicking	R-II
Wachusett Mountain Ski Area	State	Wachusett Mountain Association	Skiing	R-II
Westminster State Forests	State	DCR	Hiking, snowmobiling	RI - III
High Ridge Wildlife Management Area	State	DFW	Hiking, hunting, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, snow shoeing	R-II
Muddy Pond Conservation Area	Town	Conservation Commission	Hiking, picnicking, cross-country skiing, snow shoeing, fishing hunting	R-II
Parker Hill	Town	Conservation Commission	None	R-II
Hager Park & Rambler Area	Town	Hager Park Commission	Woodlot Management, hiking, picnicking (no hunting)	R-I
Smith Reservoir and Raymond Parcels	Town	Hager Park Commission	Hiking and hunting	R-1
Crocker Pond	Town	Crocker Pond Committee	Swimming, non-motorized boating, fishing, hiking, picnicking	R-II
Fitchburg Water Supply Lands	Fitchburg	Water Dept.	Water Supply and Protection	RI-III

**Leominster State Forest** (State owned) is a regional amenity within the boundaries of Westminster, Leominster, Fitchburg, Sterling, and Princeton containing a total of 4,300 acres of land, 1,237 acres are located in Westminster. Situated in the southeastern corner of the Town, it is bisected by Route 31. Its topography is varied from gently rolling wooded land to steep cliffs which are used for rock climbing. Sawmill Brook, which is stocked with trout, and three small lakes are found within the forests’ boundaries within Westminster. Many miles of trails are open to hikers, bicyclists and equestrians. A sandy swimming beach, picnic grove and sanitary facilities have also been developed with a day-use fee.

**Wachusett Mountain Reservation** (State owned) lies within the southern tip of Westminster off Route 140 and in the neighboring town of Princeton. It contains 2,250 acres (706 acres in Westminster), many of which are well developed for hiking and nature appreciation. Additional amenities on the site include a summit lookout with automobile and chairlift access, numerous picnic areas, an information center and sanitary and parking facilities. The **Wachusett Mountain Ski Area** within the Reservation offers state of the art facilities and services for skiers throughout the region.

**Westminster State Forests** (State owned) consist of seven land parcels totaling 384 acres. Locations of these sites are Knowler Road, Ellis Road, the Cedar Swamp, Old Gardner Road and off Bragg Hill Road. At present there are no designated activities in the forests, with the exception of a few unmaintained trails. Opportunities for recreational development (hiking, camping etc.) as well as educational and conservation efforts are available in these locations.

**High Ridge Wildlife Management Area** (State owned) located on the western boundary of Westminster and the eastern border of Gardner was once the site of a state hospital. The main complex has been converted into a medium security prison (the North Central Correctional Institute). The 1,504 acres of land that comprise this area contains valuable agricultural land. Some hay is still harvested under a contractual arrangement with the state. Numerous streams traverse the site and an exceptional wetland wildlife habitat is located here. Chapel, East Gardner and Overlook Roads traverse the site.

**Muddy Pond Conservation Area** (Town owned) in the northern corner of Westminster includes 502 acres that are both diverse and scenic. Hardwood and softwood forests, open and wooded wetlands, streams and a pond create a site that offers numerous opportunities. Numerous trails were blazed in the late 1970's and a campsite was established on the shore of Muddy Pond. The Mid-State Trail bisects the area adding to its value as an important regional open space parcel. A 2013 LAND grant from the MA Executive Office of Energy & Environmental affairs enabled the Town to protect the last portion of the Pond's shoreline that was unprotected. The Conservation Commission maintains a parking area and routinely performs trail maintenance on this property.

**Parker Hill** (Town owned) on the Fitchburg line contains 148 acres of rolling hills covered by a mixed hardwood forest. Access is through Fitchburg only via a dirt road. Several Chapter 61 (A & B) parcels form a connection from Parker Hill to Old Ashburnham Turnpike.

**Hager Park** (Town-owned) is located off Route 140 (known locally as Hager Park Road) just south of the intersection with Route 2A and the Route 2 East on-ramp. The Hager Park Commission manages the property, which consists of approximately 57 acres on the east side of the road, which abuts Woodside Cemetery and surrounds the Water Treatment facility. There are another 18 ± acres located on the west side of Route 140. These parcels of land were part of a larger tract originally given to the Town by Joseph Hager in the early 1900s. The Commission continually monitors abutting properties in the hopes of expanding the park in the future.

The Hager Park Commission oversees the Wachusett Rambler Recreation Area, a nine-acre parcel that abuts the main part of Hager Park. The Rambler has recently been cleared and undergone a field restoration, providing a pavilion for picnicking with views of Wachusett Mountain and other

locations. The Commission has developed a network of trails within the Hager Park and Rambler parcels. The trails are open to the public and a map of the trail system is available for download from the Hager Park page on the Town's website. The Commission also administers the Smith Reservoir land and the recently acquired Raymond parcel containing a total of 82 acres. These parcels are located south of Hager Park with frontage on Andrea Lane and Worcester Road.

**Crocker Pond Recreation Area** (Town owned) is located off South Ashburnham Road through access over a bridge crossing the Whitman River. The site contains 101 acres and has a sandy swimming beach and an existing trail network. The pond can be used for swimming, fishing, picnicking, ice skating and non-motorized boating. The land can be used for hiking and cross-country skiing. Crocker Pond was formerly known as the Brooks Mill Sportsmen's Club. The club was open to the employees of the James River Paper Company in Fitchburg.

**Fitchburg Water Department Lands** include three reservoirs, Wachusett Lake Reservoir, Meetinghouse Pond and Mare Meadow Reservoir. Public use of these lands is restricted except for shore fishing at designated spots. Four of the parcels constitute watershed lands and are within the Meetinghouse Pond Watershed. Access is good but parking is limited. These parcels are important to both the quality of water and the rural character of Westminster.

**Conservation Easements** - The Town holds conservation easements on 13 properties along Bragg Hill Road. The Jarvenpaa family (Jarvenpaa Family Trust) owns and actively manages the properties (490 acres in total). The easement acquisitions were a joint effort between the Town and the North County Land Trust in 2008, and took advantage of funding the Trust received from the Southern Monadnock Plateau Forest Legacy Program for the purpose of land protection. While the Jarvenpaa family continues to own and actively work the land, the Town now owns the development rights for these 13 properties. There is also a conservation restriction on property owned by Lenard and Amy Engman on Bragg Hill Road. The easement was put in place in 2013 and was partially funded through a LAND grant. This easement resulted in all of the Muddy Pond shoreline being permanently protected.

All of the permanently protected conservation and recreation lands in Westminster are depicted on the Open Space Inventory Map.

## B. UNPROTECTED PUBLIC LAND

Tax-exempt and partially exempt parcels that are *not* considered permanently protected include:

- Land containing municipal buildings and schools,
- Land under the jurisdiction of the Board of Selectmen,
- Properties the Town has taken by tax title,
- Land managed by the Department of Public Works,
- Church properties,
- Land owned by non-profit civic or service entities,
- Privately-owned recreation land, and
- Land managed by MA Department of Transportation.

The Town Assessor maintain an inventory of all tax exempt properties located in Westminster. It should be noted that while all of the BOS-managed properties are considered tax exempt, they are not considered “protected”. Most of the parcels under the Board’s jurisdiction of the are tax title properties, meaning they were taken by the Town due to non-payment of taxes. It should be noted that the vast majority of the properties taken by the Town through the tax title process are small strips of land that are unsuitable for conservation or recreation purposes.

The Town of Westminster owns six properties totaling 53 acres that contribute heavily to Westminster’s recreation needs, but are considered “unprotected”. Although these properties are presently used for recreation and open space it is not guaranteed that this use will continue.

*Table 18 - Unprotected Public Land*

<b>Land Parcel</b>	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Manager</b>	<b>Uses</b>
Academy Hill	Town	Town	Social gatherings, concerts, farmer’s market
Elementary Schools	Town	Ash-West Reg. School District	Baseball, field sports, basketball
Montachusett Regional Tech HS	Westminster-Fitchburg	Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School	Track and field, football, basketball, tennis
Oakmont and Overlook Schools	Ashburnham/Westminster	Ash-West Reg. School District	Football, basketball, tennis
Town Well Field	Town	Town Water Department	Protected unless well is decommissioned
Town Hall	Town	Parks & Recreation Commission	Basketball court outside of Town Hall

**Academy Hill** (Town owned) is the town common and is of historic significance to Westminster. It has a well-maintained lawn and a bandstand where concerts are held in the spring and summer. Academy Hill Common and the surrounding colonial style houses are included as part of Westminster’s Historic District.

**Elementary Schools** Meetinghouse School (grades pre-K1) and Westminster Elementary School (grades 2-5) share a five-acre site that contains three baseball diamonds, 2 playgrounds and a wetlands area with a trail. Ball fields are used by Little League, Town residents and Oakmont Youth Soccer.

**Montachusett Regional High School** provides service to both Westminster and Fitchburg, as well as 16 other towns. The site occupies 21 acres in Westminster and additional adjacent acres in Fitchburg. Recreational amenities at the site include a running track, four tennis courts, and ten acres of playing fields for football, field hockey, baseball and soccer. These facilities are primarily for the use of students and faculty, but can be used by local residents outside of school use. The playing fields may be used by outside teams or organizations with permission from the school office.

**Oakmont Regional High School** (grades 9- 12) and the **Overlook Middle School** (grades 6 - 8) serve the communities of both Ashburnham and Westminster. They are located on the town line with 13 acres within Westminster. Recreation facilities here include two basketball courts, four tennis courts, two outdoor tracks and 11 acres of playing fields for football, baseball, field hockey and soccer. Two miles of nature trails used as an outdoor classroom is on an adjacent property.

**The Town Well Field** (pump site) overlays the Wyman Pond primary aquifer and is within easy walking distance of Westminster's second most populated area. The 14-acre area is primarily vegetated with White and Pitch Pine. Access is currently restricted. The site is located between Honeybee Lane and Parkwood Lane.

**Basketball Court at Town Hall** is managed by the Parks and Recreation Commission and is used for the youth basketball program, summer recreational programs and pick-up basketball games when available.

It should be noted that the Parks and Recreation Commission manages two recreation facilities on private property: a multi-use playing field off of Simplex Drive (owned by NIP Owner LLC), and a Travel Soccer League field off of State Road East (owned by the TRW Company).

### C. UNPROTECTED PRIVATE LAND

Unprotected private lands are the most vulnerable of all recreation and open space lands. These land parcels can easily be sold for development or otherwise be changed from their present use. This category of open space land including those classified in Chapter 61, 61A and 61B contributes greatly to Westminster's rural character. Without these preserved lands Westminster's sense of place and quality of life would suffer. Westminster's Chapter Lands can be seen on the Open Space Inventory Map.

Private open lands designated as Forest Lands (Chapter 61), Agricultural Lands (Chapter 61A), or Private Recreation (Chapter 61B) are not protected. The designation of private parcels as Chapter 61, 61A, or 61B restricts the use of land in exchange for a significant reduction in taxes. Under such a designation the land cannot be converted to residential, industrial or commercial use.

Chapter 61, 61A and 61B are programs designed to encourage the conservation and management of the Commonwealth's forests, preserve valuable farmland, promote active agricultural and horticultural land use, preserve open space and promote recreational land uses. They offer significant local tax benefits to property owners willing to preserve land for the stated uses. In addition, if the Chapter 61 lands change use or are put up for sale, the town has right of first refusal. This option provides an opportunity for towns to purchase valuable open space or recreation land

thereby preserving the inherent beauty and ecological integrity of their community. Since over 1,469 acres (or 15.5% of Westminster) is temporarily protected in these programs, they constitute an extremely valuable resource.

Chapter 61 Forest Lands require a minimum of ten contiguous acres, which can be classified by a state forester, and require a forest management plan to be developed and implemented by the property owner. Once the application has been received and approved, the classification statement functions as a lien upon the land for taxes levied under the provisions of M.G.L. Chapter 61. The landowner must re-file every ten years or the Assessor shall remove the land from classification. Similarly, Agriculture and Private Recreation land must have a minimum of five acres to qualify, and the status must be renewed every year.

Land may be taken out of Chapter 61, 61A or 61B classification by notifying the Town and paying back taxes plus a withdrawal penalty tax. However, such land may not be sold for, or converted to, residential, commercial or industrial use while taxed under the classification without written notification to the municipality in which it is located. The Town then has 120 days to exercise its right of first refusal option to purchase the land. Should this time period pass and/or the Town state in writing that it will not act on its option, the land may be developed for alternative uses, removing it from its “open” status as forest, farm, or recreation land.

When the Town is notified by a landowner that they plan to withdraw their property from the Chapter program and sell it, the Board of Selectmen circulate the request to the Open Space Commission, Conservation Commission and Planning Board for review and comment. Should any of these entities indicate a desire to acquire said property, the proposal is then evaluated by the Town’s Advisory Committee. When Chapter lands are recommended for acquisition, the Town usually seeks the help of a regional land trust, such as the North County Land Trust or the Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust. Ultimately, it is the Board of Selectmen who makes the final decision on Chapter land acquisitions. This has been the Town’s practice; however, it has never been articulated as a written policy.

Regarding new open space acquisitions, it should be noted that the Town has 7,538 acres under permanent protection, or 31.6% of the Town’s total land area. This is large amount of protected land for even a rural community. A review of the Open Space Inventory Map will reveal that the majority of the Town’s critical environmental resources are already protected:

- The western shoreline of the Whitman Reservoir
- The entire shoreline of Muddy Pond
- The southern shoreline of Crocker Pond
- The entire shoreline of Mare Meadow Pond
- The entire shoreline of Meetinghouse Pond
- The entire shoreline of Wachusett Lake
- The Old Growth forests on Wachusett Mountain
- Westminster’s portion of the Saw Mill Pond shoreline

At this point in time, the Town is reluctant to exercise its right-of-first-refusal and purchase Chapter lands unless they achieve multiple open space/recreation goals, such as:

- Parcel is large enough and flat enough to support new athletic fields.
- Parcel would complete the Town’s landholdings along shoreline of a major waterbody.
- Parcel would link to other conservation properties.
- Parcel would help create a greenway along significant rivers and/or streams.
- Parcel would provide a link to the Midstate trail system.
- Parcel would protect a large amount of soils best suited for agriculture.
- Parcel would protect a critical stream, river or tributary.
- Parcel would protect a critical wetland.
- Parcel would protect the habitat for rare and endangered species.
- Parcel falls within the State’s BioMap resource areas.
- Parcel is necessary for protection of a public drinking water supply.

The more open space/recreation priorities a parcel meets, the more likely the Town will consider acquisition.

Other unprotected private lands include golf and sportsman clubs, private parks and private land that possess unique recreation or conservation resources.

*Table 19 - Unprotected Private Recreation Land*

Land Parcel	Location	Owner	Manager	Area (acres)	Uses
Westminster Country Club	Ellis Road	Westminster Golf Course, Inc.	LeBlanc	110	Golf, cross-country skiing
Woods of Westminster	Bean Porridge Hill Road	Bartkus	Barrows Prop	218	Golf
VFW Park	Main Street	VFW	VFW	6	Little League
Westminster Sportsmen’s Club	Ellis Road	Westminster Sportsmen’s Club Inc.	Private	55	Fishing, swimming, picnicking, snowmobiling
Westminster Rod and Gun Club	Knower Road	Tophet Fish & Game Club	Private	22	Fishing, hunting
Rice Meadow Fly Fishing Club	Notown Road	Rice Meadow Fish & Game Club Inc.	Private	19	Fishing

Two Golf Clubs are within the Town of Westminster: **Westminster Country Club** and **The Woods of Westminster**. Together these provide 328 acres of recreation space in Westminster.



**Veterans of Foreign Wars Park** is located in the town center where Westminister's population is most concentrated. The six-acre site contains one ball field that is used by various leagues and Town residents, a picnic area, and two tennis courts.

**Westminster Sportsmen's Club** is a private sportsmen's club. The 55-acre club abuts the Westminster Country Club and Burnt Mill Pond. It provides warm water fishing and swimming, a picnic area and a departure point for snowmobiles. Much of the area consists of wetlands.

**Westminster Rod and Gun Club** is a private sportsmen's club containing 22 acres of land at 175 Knower Road.

**Rice Meadow Fly Fishing Club** is a private club containing 19 acres located at 25 Notown Road.

#### NON-PROFIT OWNED AND PRIVATELY RESTRICTED LAND

The North County Land Trust (NCLT) owns four parcels of land in Westminster totaling 87 acres. The NCLT owns 48 acres on Ashburnham State Road (Map 7 Lot 1); 33 acres on West Main Street (Map 87 Lot 1); 6 acres on Fenno Drive – rear (Map 87 Lot 25); and 7,000 square feet of land in the rear of Simplex Drive.

Lastly, there are two properties along Dean Hill Road that are listed under the State's Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program, totaling 91 acres (land formerly owned by Herbert Schreiber). APR lands can continue to be farmed, but the development rights are sold to the State in perpetuity. These two properties joined the APR program in 1983.

The Table on the following page provides a breakdown of Westminster's protected lands, including who owns them, the level of protection and the number of acres counted. The table was prepared by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission and is based on data provided by the Westminster Board of Assessors.

Table 20 - Summary of Protected Open Space	
Summary of Open Space	Acreage
<b>Permanently Protected</b>	
<b>Municipal</b>	
Cities of Fitchburg & Gardner Water Depts.	1701.7
Town of Westminster (Conservation)	857.0
Town of Westminster (Recreation)	361
Town of Westminster (Cemeteries)	28
Conservation Easements	562
<b>Private</b>	
Dean Hill Road (APR)	91.0
<b>Non-Profit</b>	
North County Land Trust	87.2
<b>State</b>	
Division of Conservation & Recreation, and Fish & Wildlife	3923
<b>Total Permanently Protected Land</b>	<b>7610</b>
<b>Land Under Temporary Protection</b>	
MA Department of Transportation	52
Chapter 61 A Agriculture	620
Chapter 61 B Recreation	551
Chapter 61 Forest	451
Privately owned recreation	1041
Subtotal	<b>2715</b>
<b>Total Acres of Land Having Some Level of Protection</b>	<b>10325</b>
<b>Total Acres of Land in Westminster</b>	<b>23,872</b>
<b>% of Permanently Protected Land in Westminster</b>	<b>31.9%</b>
<b>% of Land Having Some Level of Protection in Westminster</b>	<b>42.6%</b>

Source: Board of Assessors and CMRPC analysis 2020.

## 2020 RECREATION PROGRAMS

The Town of Westminster supports many recreation programs throughout the year for all ages. Westminster Parks and Recreation Commission has five members and is appointed by the Moderator. The Recreation Commission sponsored programs are as follows:

- Summer Recreation Program – 6 week program starting in July for children ages 5-12 held in the Westminster Elementary School Gymnasium Mon – Friday 9a.m. to noon. The program allows for daily drop off, servicing as many as 100 kids a day. Tween Recreation Program was established in 2009 and dozens of teens participated in 2019.

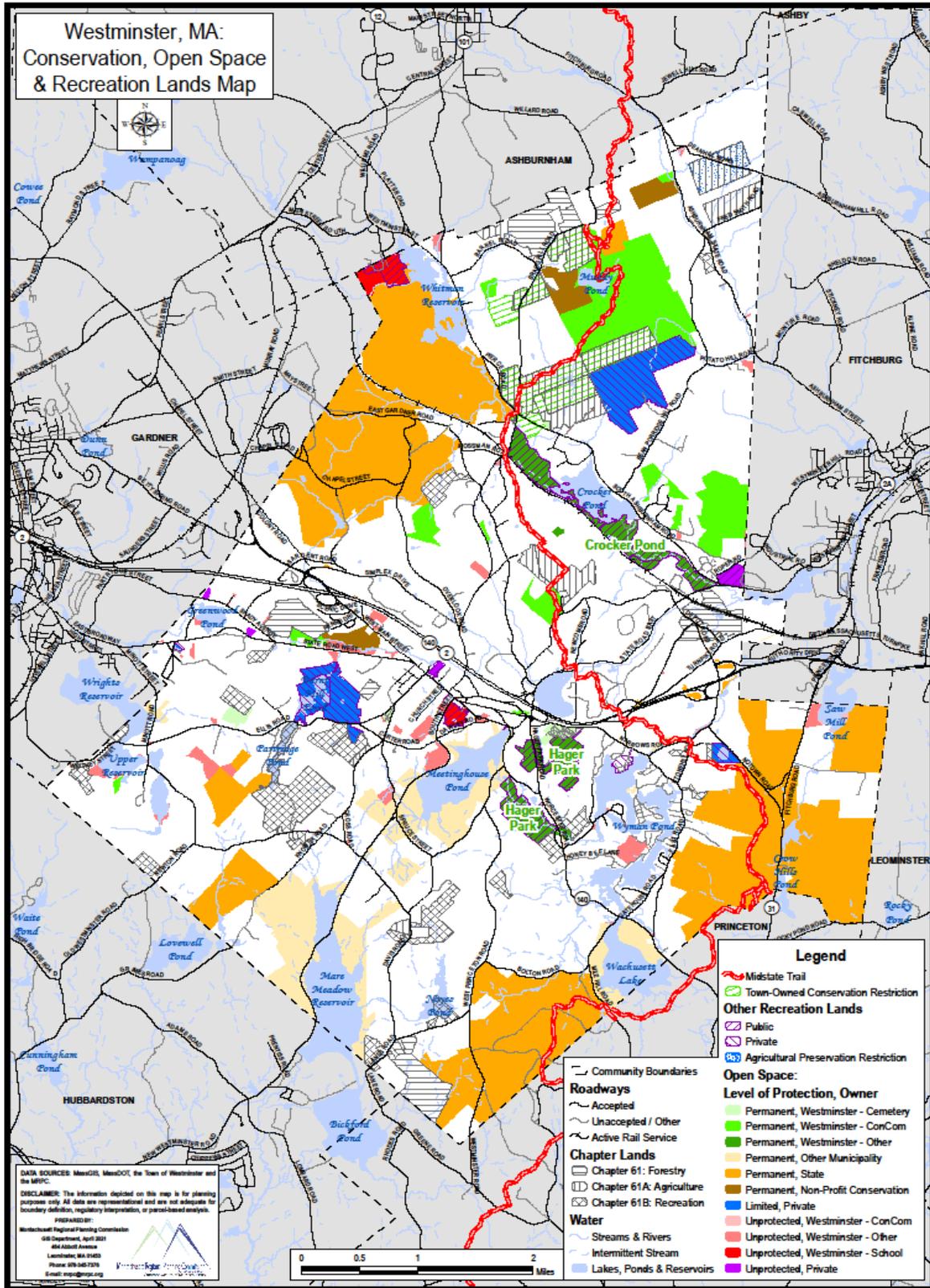
- Halloween – The Recreation Committee helps area residence promote tick-or-treating and works to help collect and redistribute candy to high volume areas around Bacon Street.
- Christmas Tree Lighting – The Recreation Committee works to bring area organizations together to celebrate an annual Christmas Tree Lighting on Academy Hill.

The Parks and Recreation Committee assists and promotes the following town recreation programs:

- Youth Basketball League – A youth basketball program in connection with the Town of Ashburnham during the winter months.
- T-ball, Softball and Cal-Ripken/Babe Ruth League Baseball – Westminster Baseball League sponsors a T-ball and youth baseball program in the spring/summer/fall months. There have also been All Star Teams who compete at different levels. In 2018 Ashburnham/Westminster U12 All-Stars made it to the World Series.
- Youth Soccer – Two soccer leagues: a local league and a travel team, which services various age levels.
- Oakmont Chargers Youth Football and Cheerleaders. The local organization has multiple age groups for both football and cheer from ages 5-14 years of age.
- North Central Mass Youth Lacrosse – The local lacrosse league offers four levels of play for youths from Kindergarten to 8th grade.
- A Youth field hockey program was recently formed for elementary school aged youths. The program has been active for two years.

The Parks and Recreation Committee oversee the care and maintenance of the four Town-owned baseball fields and the one basketball court.





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## SECTION 6 - COMMUNITY VISION

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### A. DESCRIPTION OF PROCESS

This Plan was updated by an ad hoc committee appointed by the Selectmen during the second half of 2020 and the first four months of 2021. The committee was comprised of representatives from the following entities: Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Open Space Committee, Parks & Recreation Board, Historical Commission, Agricultural Commission, Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee and the Mid-State Trail Association, along with three interested citizens.

The community goals contained herein were derived from several sources: two public forums, a citizen survey, and several meetings of the ad hoc update committee. Below is a brief description of each effort.

- The update committee prepared a 13-question citizen survey on the topics of open space and recreation. The survey was posted on the Town's website in October with a link directly from the front page. Citizens were alerted to the survey by way of an E-Alert, announcements made at public meetings and word of mouth. The survey was an on-line survey hosted by Survey Monkey. Citizens were given a month to complete the survey.
- The first public forum on open space and recreation was held Tuesday night October 20, 2020 in the evening at the Westminster Senior Center. The center has a large multi-purpose room that allows for social distancing. Because of the Governor's restrictions on indoor capacity due to the Covid-19 virus, capacity was limited to 25 people and pre-registration was required. By the date of the forum, all 25 seats had been spoken for and 23 people attended. This forum consisted of an overview of the Town's open space and recreation resources, an explanation of the various types of land protection, a discussion on how the Town typically acquires land, the Town's open space acquisition priorities, and then moved onto a discussion on what the Town's goals should be for open space and recreation.
- The second and last public forum was held on the evening of March 1, 2021 in the Westminster Senior Center. Pre-registration was again required and all seats were spoken for by the date of the forum. The second consisted of the ad hoc update committee presenting a full draft of the Open Space & Recreation Plan, answering questions and yet another discussion of the Town's goals for open space and recreation.
- The ad hoc update committee met in person four times during the course of the update process and held one conference call at the very beginning (May 2020) while Town Hall was still closed to the public because of the Covid-19 virus.

It should also be noted that several previous planning documents were also reviewed for this effort, including the Town's 1998 Community Preservation Plan, 2004 Community Development Plan, 2014 Master Plan, and the 2017 Statewide Comprehensive Open Space and Recreation Plan (SCORP).

## B. STATEMENT OF OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION GOALS

Based on the input received from the public forums and the citizen survey, the ad hoc committee preparing this Plan update reaffirmed the goals of the 2014 Open Space & Recreation Plan, believing they are all still valid and worth pursuing. These goals include the following:

- **Goal #1: Protect, conserve and enhance Westminster's farmlands and forestlands as working landscapes.** The retention of open space in private ownership is crucial to maintaining Westminster's rural character. Forest and agricultural lands have the potential to support economic activities, while at the same time preserving valuable open space.
- **Goal #2 Protect and preserve the cultural resources that are vital to the Town's rural character.** Another goal is to protect and preserve the natural and cultural resources that are vital to the Town's rural character. As can be seen from the results of the citizen survey and forums, Westminster citizens value the Town's rural character very highly. Preserving natural landscapes and cultural resources are critical components of the Town's rural character.
- **Goal #3: Provide a broad range of recreation opportunities for all age groups and abilities.** A third goal is to enhance recreational opportunities in Town and to keep pace with the growing population. The Westminster Parks and Recreation Commission has identified several needs for the planning horizon of this document (7 years).
- **Goal #4: Identify and prioritize lands for acquisition.** With approximately 31% of the Town's total land area under permanent protection, Westminster has protected the majority of its critical environmental resources. At this point, the Town is reluctant to exercise its right-of-first-refusal and purchase Chapter lands unless they achieve multiple open space/recreation goals, such as those described in Section 5. The more open space/recreation priorities a parcel meets, the more likely the Town will consider acquisition. One of the goals for this Plan is that the Town continues to identify and prioritize lands for acquisition based on the "multiple goods" strategy described in Section 5.
- **Goal #5: Increase public awareness of open space and recreation resources.** It is important for the Town to advertise and raise awareness of its open space and recreation resources and the Action Plan (Section 9 of this document) contains a number of recommendations for doing this.
- **Goal #6: Increase communication and coordination among Town boards and residents.** The Town Government chapter of the Master Plan has identified the need for increased communication and coordination among municipal boards and Town residents. Better communication and coordination will help with the preservation and protection of the Town's open space and recreation assets thus; this is another goal of this Plan.

## C. OVERALL GOALS FOR THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF WESTMINSTER

As set forth in the 2014 Master Plan, the Town of Westminster has established the following goals for its future development:

### **TOWN GOVERNMENT GOAL:**

Westminster desires to have a professionally managed town government that is efficient, fiscally sound, responsive, forward thinking and accessible to all, where decision making is fair and transparent, the quality of life for its citizens is enhanced and the character of the community is respected.

### **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GOAL**

Westminster desires a robust and diverse local economy that provides tax revenues for the town and living wage jobs for local residents in a business friendly environment, with a timely and predictable permitting system and a municipal infrastructure capable of supporting new and expanding businesses and industries.

### **HOUSING GOAL**

Westminster desires to ensure that housing opportunities are available that meet the needs of a diverse population having a broad range of income levels, with new housing provided in a measured, deliberate and planned manner that is proportional to the Town's ability to provide municipal services while maintaining the Town's rural character.

### **TRANSPORTATION GOAL**

- Construct and maintain a safe road system that is consistent with the desired small village and rural character.

### **OPEN SPACE & RECREATION GOALS**

- Protect, conserve and enhance Westminster's farmlands and forestlands as "working landscapes" which are vital to the Town's rural character.
- Protect and preserve the cultural resources that are vital to the Town's rural character.
- Provide a broad range of recreation opportunities for all age groups and abilities.
- Identify and prioritize lands for acquisition.
- Increase public awareness of open space and recreation resources.
- Increase communication and coordination among town boards and with town residents.

## **LAND USE GOALS**

- Westminster desires a walkable thriving New England-style village center that provides service-shopping-dining opportunities for residents and visitors alike;
- Commercial & Industrial districts that support existing businesses and industries while attracting new economic enterprises that will provide tax revenue for the Town and living wage jobs for the residents of Westminster and the region;
- A rural countryside that preserves the Town's working landscapes and scenic vistas; and
- Updated Zoning Bylaws, regulations and permitting systems that accomplish the above.

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## SECTION 7 - ANALYSIS OF NEED

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### A. SUMMARY OF RESOURCE PROTECTION NEEDS

There are three critical resources needing protection in Westminster, the large forested area between South Ashburnham Road and Route 12, the Whitman River valley and the boreal wetland/upland systems in the southwest portion of Town. Of the unique environments in Westminster, these areas are the largest, most sensitive areas, yet they have the least protection. Preservation of these three areas is critical to maintaining Westminster's rural character. As mentioned previously, the Master Plan citizen survey ranked the Town's rural character as the number one reason why people like living in Westminster.

The Whitman River valley has the potential to host water-related recreational facilities. The large waterbodies could support such activities as swimming, boating and fishing. Further, the land abutting the waterbodies could provide passive recreational uses such as hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing and birding.

### B. SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY'S NEEDS

#### RURAL CHARACTER

A wide variety of the community's needs have surfaced as a result of the study of previous planning documents (particularly the 2014 Master Plan), personal interviews and resident questionnaires. The issue of preserving Westminster's rural character through housing regulation and open space preservation is perceived as the most imperative need. The desire to preserve rural character is why preserving working landscapes is such an important goal in this Plan.

For the 2020 open space survey, we asked citizens to rank the following items in terms of their importance for open space preservation: agricultural lands, scenic properties, land protecting water resources and drinking water supplies, conservation or wildlife habitat, lands for active recreation (soccer, etc.), sites for passive recreation (walking, etc.), cultural & historic sites, wooded buffer areas and their wetlands, and linking open spaces / conservation areas. Not surprisingly, all of these items were ranked very important, with preserving water resources and wildlife habitat receiving the most votes.

Protecting and maintaining existing recreation and open space resources was favored over acquiring new open space and building new recreation facilities. Also, there was a high degree of support for the Town requiring mandatory dedication of open space by developers and supporting the Town's purchase of lands if they would protect/ conserve open space and natural resources.

In terms of land protection priorities, Westminster will continue to search for properties that contain several (the more the better) of the following qualities:

- Parcel is large enough and flat enough to support new athletic fields.
- Parcel would complete the Town's landholdings along shoreline of a major waterbody.
- Parcel would link to other conservation properties.

- Parcel would help create a greenway along significant rivers and/or streams.
- Parcel would provide a link to the Midstate trail system.
- Parcel would protect a large amount of soils best suited for agriculture.
- Parcel would protect a critical stream, river or tributary.
- Parcel would protect a critical wetland.
- Parcel would protect the habitat for rare and endangered species.
- Parcel falls within the State’s BioMap resource areas.
- Parcel is necessary for protection of a public drinking water supply.

## SIDEWALKS

With the construction of a new senior center at 69 West Main Street on the edge of the Village Center, there is an opportunity to enhance access and mobility for the senior population by having a coordinated and well-maintained sidewalk network within the Village Center. The demographics indicate that seniors and soon-to-be seniors are the fastest growing segments of Westminister’s population, and walking is great exercise for senior citizens. Further, increased pedestrian activity will help create a vibrant and thriving Village Center. The Town's Department of Public Works and Planning Department are working together to investigate using the State's Complete Streets program to improve sidewalks within the Village Center.

## TAX BASE

The Town’s tax base is an issue that affects how land gets used in Westminister. The Town’s residential tax base has been growing at a faster rate than its economic tax base (i.e. businesses and industries). Thus, residential home owners have been shouldering the ever increasing cost of providing municipal services. When the 2014 Master Plan citizen survey asked the question “what do you find undesirable about living in Westminister?”, the number one answer by far was “high taxes”. The Master Plan suggests a two-pronged strategy for dealing with this situation: the Town should closely monitor its spending on municipal government from year to year while pursuing an aggressive economic development strategy. The Town tackled the first issue by establishing a Capital Improvement Committee, which has established spending benchmarks and a process for having departments make capital expenditure requests. The Town's Economic Development Committee has undertaken a number of initiatives since its creation in 2011, chief among them are:

- Created a promotional brochure in 2013, updated and reprinted in 2017. New update/ reprint effort in process.
- Received a MassBio gold rating in 2013.
- Conducted a targeted business solicitation effort in 2014.
- Prepared a list of local businesses in 2014, updated in 2017.
- Prepared a list of commercial and industrial properties in 2014, updated in 2017.

- Worked with Northeastern University's Dukakis Center to conduct an Economic Development Self-Assessment in 2017.
- Received a Mass-Development Site Readiness grant in 2018, which enabled the Town to conduct an in-depth analysis of infrastructure needs for two large industrially-zoned properties (Simplex Drive and the Westminster Business Park). An industrial sites market analysis was also prepared as part of this project.
- Installed six wayfaring signs throughout the Town.
- Worked with CGI Video to prepare three promotional videos for the Town: 1) Doing Business in Westminster, 2) the Town's Recreation Resources, and 3) the Town's Historic Resources, all of which can be accessed through the Town's website.
- Working through a non-profit off-shoot known as the Westminster Village Foundation, the EDC has sponsored the Westminster Cracker Festival, a community event held every October for the past four years. Activities include: a road race, vendors, food, kid's tent, contests, and a stage for live music. This event has drawn thousands to the Town in the height of the fall season.

In terms of land available for economic development, Westminster does not have a shortage of available commercial and industrial land, in fact, the Town's State-sponsored build-out analysis of 2001 determined that the Town's commercial and industrial zoning districts have enough total vacant developable land to accommodate approximately 15,941,102 square feet of new commercial/industrial floor space. There are still several large tracts of vacant developable land in the Simplex Drive industrial area, and the bulk of the Westminster Business Park has yet to be built. There are two large commercial districts (Route 140 on the west side of Town, and the Village Inn Road district) where large swaths of vacant developable land exist. The Town's challenge is to fill in these areas with new economic development without disrupting Westminster's small town feel.

In terms of the Town's most pressing economic development & tax base need, it is creating enough economic development to offset the tax revenue the Town will lose once the landfill on Fitchburg Road closes in 2025. The landfill, operated by Waste Management Inc. generates approximately two million dollars in revenue for the Town every year. The Town and Waste Management are currently working with the State to expand the landfill, but little progress has been made on this effort to date.

## AGRICULTURE

In terms of tax dollars generated, farming and agriculture is a small component of the local economy; however, the rural landscapes necessary for farming are essential components of the Town's rural character.

The Town has an Agricultural Commission charged with encouraging the pursuit of agriculture and agriculturally-based economic opportunities by encouraging the production and purchase of locally-grown goods, promoting agricultural awareness and sponsoring agricultural-related

education opportunities. Towards that end, the Commission led the effort to have the Town adopt a “Right to Farm” bylaw. The Commission also sponsors the Farmer’s Market at Academy Hill from May through October every year, which is well attended by locals and regional residents.

New agricultural operations are likely to be smaller than those that currently exist in Town. New farms will likely average five to fifteen acres in size and some could be as small as 2,000 square feet. In many cases, new farms will be of the micro variety, homesteading and hobby farmers. Products produced will cover the gamut of what is possible in New England, including but not limited to market gardens, small fruits, livestock, small dairy, eggs, hay, bees, firewood, wood chips and custom milling. Small or large, agricultural operations help maintain Westminster’s rural character.

In terms of agriculture, the Town's most pressing need is to minimize the loss of farmland soils to new development. Once topsoil suitable for farming is disturbed, it is no longer suitable for farming. This has been our most pressing issue as the Town's development activity is now exceeding pre Great Recession levels.

#### RECREATION NEEDS – SPECIAL POPULATIONS

While Westminster’s Parks and Recreation Commission has a number of programs targeting children and young teenagers, there are no formal programs targeting high school-age children. The Commission does hire a handful of teenagers to help run its summer program, and teenagers make extensive use the basketball court outside of Town Hall for pick-up games. The Commission was looking to initiate a Teen’s Night at the Community Center as a pilot project in 2020, but then the Covid-19 virus hit and this effort was shelved for the time being.

The Westminster Council on Aging offers a variety of programming and services to people over the age of 60, anyone who has a disability, or people with low income. More than 2,200 residents are eligible. The Council offers health, fitness, and nutrition programs (both congregate meals and Meals on Wheels), referral services, support groups, lectures and entertainment, social gathering space and time, SHINE counselors, home health care to support independent living, and also transportation. The Council on Aging works in conjunction with state and local organizations to enhance the quality of life of Westminster’s seniors through available resources. User fees are charged for some programming such as exercise classes. Other funding comes from the Town, state, and charitable sources, and a formula grant from the federal government.

Westminster completed its first ever Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Self-Assessment and Transition Plan in 2020. The Town is now addressing several identified deficiencies including renovating the Town Hall basketball court to make it ADA access compliant, and the Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee has ordered two beach mats that will allow handicapped citizens to access the beach and the water at Crocker Pond.

## RECREATION PRIORITIES

The 2020 on-line open space and recreation received 336 responses. In terms of what citizens regarded as the Town's top needs for recreation, the survey identified hiking/walking trails as the top need, followed by outdoor playgrounds, dog walking parks, athletic fields, organized sports and nature areas.

The survey results dovetail nicely with the results of the 2017 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). The on-line and phone surveys for the 2017 SCORP both identified hiking and biking trails as a high priority. In the last twenty years, the Town of Westminster has bought new conservation land for three areas in particular: the Crocker Pond Recreation Area was created in the mid-2000s and is home to a swim beach and a series of hike/bike trails known as the Whitman River trail system. Hager Park has continued to expand land-wise and also contains an interior trail system. The Town also bought the last bit of shoreline for Muddy Pond, thus completely and permanently protecting the entire shoreline around the pond. The trail system within the Muddy Pond conservation area connects to the larger Midstate Trail system which runs throughout Westminster in a south-to-north direction. There is a Midstate Trail Organization that has many members from Westminster, and their charge is to maintain the Midstate Trail on an ongoing basis.

An interview with the Parks and Recreation Commission identified the need for more athletic fields and a children's playground in the Town Center. It should be noted that the on-line survey for the 2017 SCORP also identified playgrounds for young children (ages 2 - 5) as a high priority need. The Town has investigated several sites in the Village Center for a children's playground, but a community consensus on which site to choose has proven elusive thus far. The Commission is currently investigating two sites that are large enough to accommodate new athletic fields: the first is a 17-acre parcel off of Ellis Road that was gifted to the Town as part of a ground-mounted solar development. The second is a 51-acre parcel off Colony Road that the Town recently acquired via tax title. If either property is deemed suitable for new athletic fields, the Town will likely pursue a Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC) Grant for the purpose of constructing the fields.

Funding the Commission's activities has been a longstanding struggle, and a review of its budget for the last ten years shows either reductions or level-funding. The Commission will need to increase its budget in the future, if only to keep pace with the capital equipment needs of the Town's existing facilities. Keeping full membership of the Commission has also proven to be a challenge; however, the Commission has recently welcomed two new members who are interested in helping the Town plan for its future recreation needs.

In terms of recreation, the Town's most pressing needs continue to be land for new athletic fields, finding a place for a children's playground close to the Village Center, finding volunteers and funding.

## WATER ACCESS

The lack of public access to waterbodies in Westminster is ironic in light of the abundance of this resource. While the ownership of the majority of this resource by Fitchburg Water Company

presently offers it protection from development, it also severely restricts its recreation potential. A dialogue with the city of Fitchburg along with a study of other municipalities' water resources could result in learning how to maintain water quality and simultaneously allow some recreation activities within these resources. Further, the Town may wish to take a closer look at its shoreline landholdings to see if there are any areas suitable for a small-scale boat launch (i.e. canoes and other non-motorized boats).

### C. MANAGEMENT NEEDS

In terms of the management of Town-owned properties, the Town's Planning Department evaluated all of the Town's landholdings in 2012, with an eye towards making sure each property was being managed by the appropriate municipal entity. Of the properties managed by the Board of Selectmen, there is a 32 acre property along the shoreline of Minott Pond that is currently under the jurisdiction of the Selectmen which should be turned over to the Conservation Commission for permanent protection. As of the writing of this Plan, the Selectmen have yet to transfer these two properties to the Conservation Commission; however, it should be noted that the Conservation Commission has yet to formally request the land transfer.

Every summer, the Town Planner and Treasurer-Collector conduct an exercise where they evaluate the annual list of tax delinquent properties to determine if any of them would be suitable for municipal purposes. The final list is reviewed by all Town departments and presented to the Board of Selectmen. However, most of the properties that end up on the tax delinquent list are unusable due to wetlands, steep slopes, size, lack of frontage or other factors.

In terms of preserving "working landscapes", the Planning Board recently completed a three year effort to revise and modernize the Town's Zoning Bylaw. The Bylaw's cluster housing provision is now allowed By Right (as opposed to Special Permit) and agriculture is one of the allowable uses for the open space areas created by new cluster subdivisions. During the Zoning Bylaw update process, the Planning Board sought the input of the Town's Agricultural Commission to make sure that the new bylaw did not inhibit farming as a land use.

One item of concern has occurred during the last decade as a threat to preserving large tracts of land as working landscapes: ground-mounted solar farms. State and Federal incentives for solar power has created a market for building new ground-mounted solar fields. Developers of these facilities look for communities with large areas of undeveloped land and Westminster fits the bill in this case. Since 2013, the Planning Board has approved twelve ground-mounted solar fields covering approximately 165 acres of land. Half of the fields have been built and are operational while the other half are under construction. All told, these solar fields will produce 31 million Kilowatts of electricity once operational. While the first few solar farms were located in wooded areas, there have been several solar farms proposed that are quite close to residential neighborhoods, causing great concern for the abutters. The Planning Board attempted to address their concerns by adopting a solar power provision within the Zoning Bylaw in 2018. Solar farms are now allowed by Special Permit (as opposed to By Right) and must reserve 50% of their land area as open space.

The Town's Open Space Committee and Agricultural Commission should continue to work with the Planning Board to review existing bylaws and regulations to search for impediments to "working landscapes" and promote a more sensitive development of land that preserves open space. To promote economic activity and generate income for open space management, Town boards should continue to work together to investigate the possibility of leasing Town-owned open space lands for forestry, farming and agriculture. Management plans should be developed for forest land which will promote multiple-uses.

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## SECTION 8 – GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

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**Goal One: Protect, conserve and enhance Westminster’s farmlands and forestlands as “working landscapes” which are vital to the Town’s rural character.**

**Objectives:**

1.a. Inform the public about the protection possibilities for their land such as land trusts, conservation restrictions or fee simple acquisition. This could take the form of an informational brochure that could be placed in the offices of the Assessor and the Treasurer-Collector. This information could also be posted on the Town's website and sent out as an E-Alert to citizens that have signed up for this service.

Responsible Municipal Entities: This could be a project for a newly revitalized Open Space Committee, but would also need the involvement of the Assessor and our regional land trusts.

Timeline for Completion: 2022

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1.b. Prepare an informational brochure that would inform the public about incentives for keeping their land as open space, especially through Chapter 61 (Forestry) Chapter 61A (Agriculture) and Chapter 61 B (Recreation). This could also take the form of an informational brochure that could be placed in the offices of the Assessor and the Treasurer-Collector. This information could also be posted on the Town's website and sent out as an E-Alert to citizens that have signed up for this service.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee, but would also need the involvement of the Assessor.

Timeline for Completion: 2022

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1.c. Adopt a policy on dealing with Chapter land withdrawal requests. Currently there is no set policy on receiving and processing Chapter land withdrawal requests. Reviewing submitted requests for completeness and compliance with the law has been haphazard, as has distributing such requests to other municipal entities for their input. The new policy should provide guidance to property owners about how to initiate the process, and for how the Town will handle such requests.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Board of Selectmen with input from the Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Agricultural Commission, and Parks and Recreation Commission.

Timeline for Completion: 2022

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1.d. Evaluate Town-owned properties for their suitability for use as community gardens. For several years now, the Town's Agricultural Commission has expressed interest in finding one or more Town-owned properties for use as a community garden. This effort has yet to bear fruit (sorry) because evaluating the entire list of Town-owned properties takes a great deal of time and the Commission is already stretched thin addressing other priorities. The Commission could use some professional assistance with this effort, whether it is from the Town Planner or outside expertise.

Responsible Municipal Entities: The Open Space Committee working with the Agricultural Commission and Town Planner.

Timeline for Completion: Ongoing.

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1.e. Update and implement the Hager Park and Muddy Pond forest management plans. Keeping these plans up to date and implementing their recommendations is an ongoing management issue that should be maintained.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Hager Park Commission and Conservation Commission.

Timeline for Completion: As needed.

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## **Goal Two: Protect and preserve the cultural resources that are vital to the town's rural character.**

### **Objectives:**

2.a. Identify and preserve culturally significant buildings and sites through public education and participation. The Historical Commission has done a very good job of this and this effort should be maintained.

Responsible Municipal Entity: Historical Commission.

Timeline for Completion: ongoing

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2.b. Investigate the Town's options for protecting the scenic qualities of Westminster's rural roads. While the idea of adopting a Scenic Road bylaw has yet to gain traction amongst Westminster's policy makers, the Town should investigate what other options exist for preserving the scenic qualities of its rural roads.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee, DPW Commissioners, Tree Warden, and Planning Board.

Timeline for Completion: 2027

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2.c. Develop a plan for the protection of the Westminster Village – Academy Hill Historic District. This idea was suggested in the 2014 Open Space & Recreation Plan, but has yet to get underway. The recent tear down of an historic structure along Academy Hill has generated new interest in developing a protection plan for the historic district.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Historical Commission and Planning Board.

Timeline for Completion: 2027

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2.d. Adopt a Demolition Delay bylaw that would apply to the Town's most significant historic structures. The Historical Commission has been working on this idea for the past three years and plans to bring such a bylaw before voters at the Annual Town Meeting in May 2021.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Historical Commission.

Timeline for Completion: 2021

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2.e. Update the 1998 Historic Preservation Plan and work with other Town entities to implement its recommendations. This effort will be a major undertaking and no doubt take several years to complete. It will also require funding necessary to hire professional expertise.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Historical Commission.

Timeline for Completion: 2027

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**Goal Three: Provide a broad range of recreation opportunities for all age groups and abilities.**

**Objectives:**

3.a. Investigate offering incentives to developers for providing recreation amenities as part of large-scale developments. The Planning Board has previously considered offering incentives for developers to provide new affordable housing units, but have yet to agree on how to do this. Perhaps when revisiting this issue, the Board can discuss offering developers some incentives to provide recreation amenities above and beyond the open space that gets created as part of cluster housing proposals.

Responsible Municipal Entity: Planning Board.

Timeline for Completion: 2024

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3.b. Host an annual trail maintenance day for Hager Park and Crocker Pond. Currently the trails at Hager Park and Crocker Pond are maintained by Commission members and paid summer staff. However, having the Town sponsor an annual trail maintenance day would be a great way to increase public awareness of these recreation areas and increase volunteerism.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Hager Park Commission, Crocker Pond Committee and Open Space Committee.

Timeline for Completion: Ongoing

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3.c. Assist in the development and rerouting of the Midstate Trail in Westminster. Fortunately for the Planning Board, one of its members is a longtime member of the Midstate Trail Committee. When development proposals come before the Board, they look for opportunities to create links to the Midstate Trail. One recent development plan required the Planning Board to work with a property owner to relocate the Trail in the vicinity of North Common Road. The Planning Board should continue to look for new opportunities to keep the Midstate Trail intact.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Planning Board working with the Midstate Trail Committee.

Timeline for Completion: Ongoing

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3.d. Secure protective easements on those portions of the Midstate Trail that occur on private property. When the Planning Board reviews development plans for land that contains a portion of the Midstate Trail, they work with the developer to secure protective easements for the Trail. The Planning Board should continue this practice.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Planning Board working with the Midstate Trail Committee.

Timeline for Completion: Ongoing

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3.e. Increase sidewalks within the Village Center to provide greater mobility opportunities for the elderly population. The Town's Department of Public works (DPW) maintains the network of sidewalks within the Village Center. DPW is currently reviewing its options for providing a sidewalk that will link the Village Center with Academy Hill. DPW is also planning to widen and extend the sidewalk along Nichols Street in the vicinity of the Post Office.

Responsible Municipal Entity: Department of Public Works.

Timeline for Completion: Ongoing

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3.f. Properly maintain our existing recreation facilities and secure additional parking for the ball-fields on South Street. The Parks and Recreation Commission currently maintain the South Street ball-fields, but haven't been able to secure land for additional parking. The Commission should continue maintenance as an ongoing concern and continue its search for parking land.

Responsible Municipal Entity: Parks and Recreation Commission.

Timeline for Completion: Ongoing

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3.g. Assess all Town-owned conservation lands for public accessibility. The Town recently completed its first ADA Self-Assessment and Transition Plan that included an assessment of the Town's parks and recreation areas for handicapped accessibility, the Plan did not evaluate access for all of the lands under the jurisdiction of the Conservation Commission, which consists of 27 properties scattered throughout Town. Many citizens don't even know about these properties let alone how to access them. The Open Space Committee should work with the Conservation Commission to evaluate access to these properties, upgrade the access if possible, and then make this information available to the public.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee and Conservation Commission.

Timeline for Completion: Ongoing

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3.h. Design and construct new athletic fields, parking and amenities at the Town's newly acquired property on Colony Road. The Town recently acquired this 50-acre parcel through the tax title process and has begun working with an engineering firm to prepare a layout design for several athletic fields, parking and associated amenities. The Town hopes to apply to the State's PARC grant program for construction funds in the summer of 2021.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Parks and Recreation Commission, Board of Selectmen and Town Planner.

Timeline for Completion: 2023

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3.i. Find land in the Village Center for a new children's playground, then design and build it. This effort has been going on for over a decade, but available land in the Village Center has been hard to come by. The Town's policy makers are currently considering what to do with the old Town Hall on Bacon Street, which was built in 1839 and sits on a 0.56 acre parcel. The Town spent two years trying to find a buyer who would rehabilitate the building and put it back into productive use, but found no buyers; meanwhile, the building continues to deteriorate. One idea under consideration is taking down the building, using some of the land as overflow parking for the Library across the street, and using the remaining land as a children's playground.

Responsible Municipal Entity: the Parks and Recreation Commission and Town Planner.

Timeline for Completion: 2023

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3.j. Redesign Main Street through the Village Center to make it more accessible for bicycles and pedestrians, and add street trees and landscaping. This project will take a great deal of time to come to fruition and the timeline for completion will be well beyond the seven years of this Action Plan. The Town will need to prepare a redesign plan and work with the State to obtain construction funding through the regional Transportation Improvement Plan.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Board of Selectmen, Public Works Commission, Planning Board and the MA Department of Transportation.

Timeline for Completion: Long range plan will extend beyond the seven years of this Action Plan

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**Goal Four: Identify and prioritize lands for acquisition.**

**Objectives:**

4.a. Support the Midstate Trail Open Space Committee in the identification of priority land acquisition parcels along or abutting the Midstate Trail. This is an ongoing effort between the Midstate Trail Committee and the Town through the Planning Board and Open Space Committee. The Planning Board reviews all development proposals for land that either contains a portion of the Midstate Trail or could provide a link to the Trail. It has been very beneficial to this effort to have a Planning Board member who is also a member of the Midstate Trail Committee.

Responsible Municipal Entity: Planning Board in conjunction with the Midstate Trail Committee.

Timeline for Completion: Ongoing

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4.b. Educate citizens and local officials about the Community Preservation Act and move towards its adoption. While the Town considered and ultimately rejected joining the CPA during the early days of the program, reconsideration may be in order. Money is always tight for open space acquisition, historic preservation and affordable housing and it is exactly these three public goods that the CPA helps to fund.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Agricultural Commission, Historical Commission, Parks and Recreation Commission, Conservation Commission, Planning Board and Board of Selectmen.

Timeline for Completion: 2022

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4.c. Increase the Annual Town Meeting's contribution to the open space fund from \$1,000 a year to \$2,000 a year. Every Annual Town Meeting sees a warrant article that asks voters to

approve \$1,000 to be deposited in the Conservation Commission's open space acquisition fund. Land is expensive and the \$1,000 contribution isn't providing enough money for the Town to seriously consider acquiring new open space lands.

Responsible Municipal Entity: Conservation Commission.

Timeline for Completion: 2022

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4.d. Acquire environmentally sensitive areas that meet the criteria outlined in Section 7 Resource Protection needs. The Town should continue to use the criteria outlined in Section 7 of this plan as its metric for evaluating the possible purchase of new open space properties.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Conservation Commission, Open Space Committee and Board of Selectmen.

Timeline for Completion: Ongoing

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4.e. Investigate creating a stabilization account for open space acquisitions. The Town has a number of existing stabilization accounts (building maintenance, information technology, etc.) that it contributes money into every year at the Annual Town Meeting. The Town should consider creating a new stabilization account to help fund the purchase of new open space acquisitions.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Board of Selectmen, Town Administrator and Advisory Board.

Timeline for Completion: 2022

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4.f. When considering the purchase of open space properties in the vicinity of Wachusett Mountain, investigate the possibility of tapping into the Wachusett Mountain Ski Area Land Acquisition Fund to help cover a portion of the cost. This fund is administered jointly by the managers of the ski area (Wachusett Mountain Inc.) and the MA Department of Conservation Resources (DCR). The ski area contributes 1% of all sales to this fund whose purpose is to acquire additional lands in the vicinity of Wachusett Mountain if they are desirable for conservation and recreation purposes. It is DCR that makes the final decision on how the funds are spent.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Conservation Commission, Open Space Committee and Board of Selectmen.

Timeline for Completion: Ongoing

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**Goal Five: Increase public awareness of open space and recreation resources.**

**Objectives:**

5.a. Develop a Town-wide signage program for open space and recreation areas. Currently, there is no coordinated signage program for Town-owned open space properties and recreation areas and some of the open space properties have no signage whatsoever. Signage at our recreation areas are handled by the entity in charge of management, i.e. the Hager Park Commissioners handle the signage for Hager Park, the Crocker Pond Committee handles their own signage, and the Parks and Recreation Commission handle signage for their properties. It would be preferable for the Town to have a coordinated signage program that covers such items as: signage materials, color, font appearance, size and dimensions.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Parks and Recreation Commission, Hager Park Commission, Crocker Pond Committee, Conservation Commission and the Open Space Committee.

Timeline for Completion: 2024

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5.b. Prepare a master list of civic organizations that could assist with maintenance of recreation areas and other conservation/recreation-related projects. It would be helpful if all of the municipal entities with open space and recreation management responsibilities had a list of civic organizations they could call upon for a variety of maintenance projects, such as an annual trail maintenance day as suggested previously under Objective 3.b.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Parks and Recreation Commission, Hager Park Commission, Crocker Pond Committee, Conservation Commission and the Open Space Committee.

Timeline for Completion: 2022

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5.c. Create maps and trail guides for those Town conservation areas that are suitable for public access. Some of the Town's trail networks have trail maps prepared using Global Positioning System (GPS) technology, some have trail maps that were hand-drawn a long time ago and some have no trail maps at all. The Montachusett Regional Planning Commission's GIS Department offers training on how to use GPS equipment for trail mapping and the Town entities charged with trail maintenance should utilize this service and prepare up-to-date location-accurate trail maps for their properties.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Parks and Recreation Commission, Hager Park Commission, Crocker Pond Committee, Conservation Commission and the Open Space Committee.

Timeline for Completion: 2022

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5.d. Coordinate environmental education into the school district curriculum using local conservation resources. The Town should offer to send its Conservation Agent to local schools for the purpose of educating students on nature, the environment and local flora and fauna. These visits could include both classroom instruction and field visits to the Town's open space properties.

Responsible Municipal Entities: The Conservation Commission and the Open Space Committee.

Timeline for Completion: 2024

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5.e. Send every household the Economic Development Committee's promotional map/brochure that highlights the Town's major recreation and open space resources. The Town's Economic Development Committee that depicts the Town's restaurants, shops, historic resources, recreation areas and farms. Copies of the brochure are distributed to high volume tourist destinations like the Wachusett Mountain Ski Area, Johnny Appleseed Visitor Center, Great Wolf Resort, Wachusett Brewery and the Old Mill Restaurant. Copies are also distributed locally at the Town Hall, Library and the Westminster Pharmacy. The brochure is currently being updated and reprinted. As Westminster continues to grow, having new people move to Town every year, sending each household a brochure would be an excellent way to educate residents both new and old about the Town's open space and recreation resources.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Economic Development Committee and the Open Space Committee.

Timeline for Completion: 2022

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5.f. Install "Share the Road" signs along the Town's rural roads and "Working Farm - Slow Down" signs in front of the Town's active farms. Many of the Town's rural roads are quite narrow and there have been documented conflicts between trucks/cars and farming vehicles. In an effort to address this, the Town should install signage to alert drivers that they need to share the road with other users and that they should slow down when passing active farming operations.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Department of Public Works, Police Department and the Agricultural Committee.

Timeline for Completion: 2024

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**Goal Six: Increase communication and coordination among Town boards and with Town residents.**

**Objectives:**

6.a. Continue to guide the implementation of the open space plan, and assist in coordinating the efforts of various Town boards and citizen groups. The Town's Open Space Committee has dwindled down to just three members and hasn't met during the past two years. It is hoped that this

Plan update and the public forums supporting it will generate enough citizen interest to revitalize the Open Space Committee.

Responsible Municipal Entity: Open Space Committee.

Timeline for Completion: Ongoing

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6.b. Hold Semi-Annual Coordination Meetings: Those municipal entities with open space responsibilities should meet twice a year to discuss community issues.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Parks and Recreation Committee, Historical Commission, Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee, Agricultural Commission, Hager Park Committee, Planning Board and Board of Selectmen.

Timeline for Completion: Ongoing

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6.c. Establish a coordinated policy for the distribution of meeting agendas and meeting minutes. Right now, the distribution of meeting agendas and meeting minutes is haphazard: some boards circulate their agendas but not their minutes, some boards circulate their minutes but not their agendas. As a means of increasing coordination among municipal boards that hold public hearings, the Board of Selectmen should establish a coordinated policy for the distribution of both meeting agendas and minutes.

Responsible Municipal Entity: Town Administrator and Board of Selectmen in conjunction with all boards, commissions and committees that hold public hearings.

Timeline for Completion: 2022

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6.d. Designate a member of the Town's IT staff to assist the Town's various recreation and open space committees with routine updates of their web pages. The Town's various recreation-related commissions are staffed by volunteers with families and day jobs; thus, updating their respective web pages has been sporadic at best. The Town recently hired a new full-time IT person and perhaps this person could assist the Town's recreation-related commissions with keeping their web pages up to date.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Town Administrator, Board of Selectmen and Town's Information Technology (IT) staff.

Timeline for Completion: 2022

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6.e. Create an all-inclusive Recreation web page for the Town's website. Create a "Recreation" link directly from the front page of the Town's website. The new recreation page would include links to the web pages for the Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Parks and Recreation Committee, Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee, Agricultural Commission and Hager Park Committee. Further, this web page would have links to the 2021 Open Space & Recreation Plan, Town-wide trail maps, and individual trail maps for both Hager Park and Crocker Pond.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Parks and Recreation Committee, Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee, Agricultural Commission and Hager Park Committee with assistance from the Town's Information Technology (IT) staff.

Timeline for Completion: 2021

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## SECTION 9 - ACTION PLAN

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**Goal One: Protect, conserve and enhance Westminster’s farmlands and forestlands as “working landscapes” which are vital to the Town’s rural character.**

<b>Prioritized Action Items</b>	<b>Responsible Parties</b>	<b>Complete By</b>	<b>Funding Source</b>
Inform the public about the protection possibilities for their land such as land trusts, conservation restrictions or fee simple acquisition.	Open Space Committee Assessors, Regional Land Trusts	2022	Volunteers
Prepare an informational brochure that would inform the public about incentives for keeping their land as open space, especially through Chapter 61 (Recreation) Chapter 61A (Agriculture) and Chapter 61 B (Recreation).	Open Space Committee Assessors	2022	Volunteers
Adopt a policy on dealing with Chapter land withdrawal requests.	Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Agricultural Commission, Parks and Recreation Commission	2022	None Needed
Evaluate Town-owned properties for their suitability for use as community gardens.	Open Space & Agricultural Committees	Ongoing	Staff & volunteers
Update and implement the Hager Park and Muddy Pond forest management plans.	Hager Park Commission & Conservation Commission	As Needed	Town Meeting Appropriation

**Goal Two: Protect and preserve the cultural resources that are vital to the town’s rural character.**

<b>Prioritized Action Items</b>	<b>Responsible Parties</b>	<b>Complete By</b>	<b>Funding Source</b>
Identify and preserve culturally significant buildings and sites through public education and participation.	Historical Commission	Ongoing	Volunteers
Adopt a Demolition Delay bylaw that would apply to the Town's most significant historic structures.	Historical Commission	2021	None Needed

Develop a plan for the protection of the Westminster Village – Academy Hill Historic District.	Historical Commission	2027	Town Meeting Appropriation
Update the 1998 Historic Preservation Plan and work with other Town entities to implement its recommendations.	Historical Commission	2027	Town Meeting Appropriation
Investigate the Town’s options for protecting the scenic qualities of Westminster’s rural roads.	Open Space Committee, DPW Commissioners, Tree Warden, and Planning Board	2027	Volunteers

**Goal Three: Provide a broad range of recreation opportunities for all age groups and abilities.**

<b>Prioritized Action Items</b>	<b>Responsible Parties</b>	<b>Complete By</b>	<b>Funding Source</b>
Design and construct new athletic fields, parking and amenities at the Town's newly acquired property on Colony Road.	Parks and Recreation Commission, Board of Selectmen and Town Planner	2023	State grants
Find land in the Village Center for a new children's playground, then design and build it.	Parks and Recreation Commission and Town Planner	2023	State grants
Host an annual trail maintenance day for Hager Park and Crocker Pond.	Hager Park Commission, Crocker Pond Commission and Open Space Committee.	Ongoing	Volunteers
Increase sidewalks within the Village Center to provide greater mobility opportunities for the elderly population.	Department of Public Works	Ongoing	Chapter 90 funds, Town Meeting appropriations and grants.
Redesign Main Street through the Village Center to make it more accessible for bicycles and pedestrians, and add street trees and landscaping.	Board of Selectmen, Public Works Commission, Planning Board & MA Dept. of Transportation	Long-Range Effort	State grants and Town Meeting appropriations
Properly maintain our existing recreation facilities and secure additional parking for the ball-fields on South Street.	Parks and Recreation Commission	Ongoing	Town Meeting appropriations
Investigate offering incentives to developers for providing recreation amenities as part of large-scale developments.	Planning Board	2024	None Needed
Assess all Town-owned conservation lands for public accessibility.	Open Space Committee and Conservation Commission.	Ongoing	None Needed

Assist in the development and rerouting of the Midstate Trail in Westminster.	Planning Board and Midstate Trail Committee	Ongoing	None Needed
Secure protective easements on those portions of the Midstate Trail that occur on private property.	Planning Board and Midstate Trail Committee	Ongoing	None Needed

**Goal Four: Identify and prioritize lands for acquisition.**

<b>Prioritized Action Items</b>	<b>Responsible Parties</b>	<b>Complete By</b>	<b>Funding Source</b>
Investigate creating a stabilization account for open space acquisitions.	Open Space Committee, Board of Selectmen, Town Administrator and Advisory Board	2022	Town Meeting Appropriation
Increase the Annual Town Meeting's annual contribution to the open space fund from \$1,000 to \$2,000.	Conservation Commission	2022	Town Meeting Appropriation
Educate citizens and local officials about the Community Preservation Act and move towards its adoption.	Agricultural Commission, Historical Commission, Parks and Recreation Commission, Conservation Commission, Planning Board and Board of Selectmen	2022	Volunteers
Acquire environmentally sensitive areas that meet the criteria outlined in Section 7 Resource Protection needs.	Conservation Commission, Open Space Committee and Board of Selectmen	Ongoing	State grants, open space acquisition fund and Town Meeting appropriations
Support the Midstate Trail Open Space Committee in the identification of priority land acquisition parcels along or abutting the Midstate Trail.	Planning Board and Midstate Trail Committee	Ongoing	None Needed
When considering the purchase of open space properties near Wachusett Mountain, investigate the possibility of tapping into the Wachusett Mountain Ski Area Land Acquisition Fund to help cover a portion of the cost.	Conservation Commission, Open Space Committee and Board of Selectmen	Ongoing	Wachusett Mountain Ski Area Land Acquisition Fund

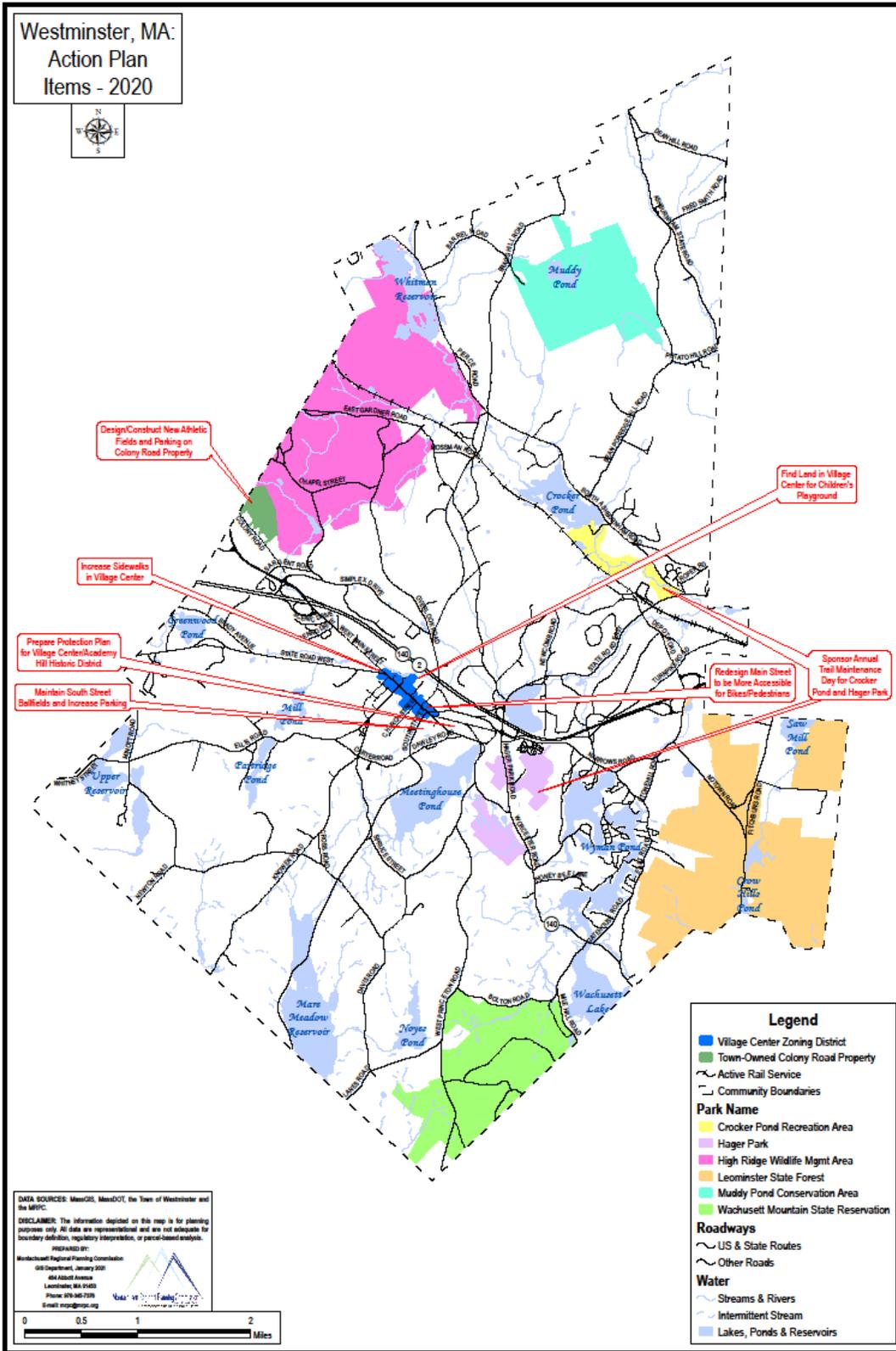
**Goal Five: Increase public awareness of open space and recreation resources.**

<b>Prioritized Action Items</b>	<b>Responsible Parties</b>	<b>Complete By</b>	<b>Funding Source</b>
Create maps and trail guides for those Town conservation areas that are suitable for public access.	Parks and Recreation Commission, Hager Park Commission, Crocker Pond Commission, Conservation Commission and the Open Space Committee.	2022	Town Meeting Appropriation
Prepare a master list of civic organizations that could assist with maintenance of recreation areas and other conservation/recreation-related projects.	Parks and Recreation Commission, Hager Park Commission, Crocker Pond Commission, Conservation Commission and the Open Space Committee	2022	Volunteers
Send every household the Economic Development Committee's promotional map/ brochure that highlights the Town's major recreation and open space resources.	Economic Development Committee and the Open Space Committee	2022	Committee budgets
Develop a Town-wide signage program for open space and recreation areas.	Parks and Recreation Commission, Hager Park Commission, Crocker Pond Commission, Conservation Commission and the Open Space Committee	2024	Town Meeting Appropriation
Install "Share the Road" signs along the Town's rural roads and "Working Farm - Slow Down" signs in front of the Town's active farms.	Department of Public Works, Police Department and the Agricultural Committee	2024	Town Meeting Appropriation
Coordinate environmental education into the school district curriculum using local conservation resources.	Conservation Commission and the Open Space Committee	2024	Volunteers

**Goal Six: Increase communication and coordination among Town boards and with Town residents.**

<b>Prioritized Action Items</b>	<b>Responsible Parties</b>	<b>Complete By</b>	<b>Funding Source</b>
Create an all-inclusive Recreation web page for the Town's website.	Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Parks and Recreation Committee, Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee, Agricultural Commission and Hager Park Committee with assistance from the Town's Information Technology (IT) staff	2021	Staff
Hold Semi-Annual Coordination Meetings.	Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Parks and Recreation Committee, Historical Commission, Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee, Agricultural Commission, Hager Park Committee, Planning Board and Board of Selectmen	Ongoing	Volunteers
Establish a coordinated policy for the distribution of meeting agendas and meeting minutes.	Town Administrator and Board of Selectmen	2022	Staff
Designate a member of the Town's IT staff to assist the Town's various recreation and open space committees with routine updates of their web pages.	Town Administrator, Board of Selectmen and Town's Information Technology (IT) staff	2022	Staff
Continue to guide the implementation of the open space plan, and assist in coordinating the efforts of various Town boards and citizen groups.	Open Space Committee	Ongoing	Staff and volunteers

Westminster, MA:  
Action Plan  
Items - 2020



DATA SOURCE: MassGIS, MassDOT, the Town of Westminster and the MPFC.  
DISCLAIMER: The information depicted on this map is for planning purposes only. All data are representational and are not adequate for boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel-based analysis.  
PREPARED BY:  
Westchester Regional Planning Commission  
GIS Department, January 2020  
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Email: map@wrcpa.org



**Legend**

- Village Center Zoning District
- Town-Owned Colony Road Property
- Active Rail Service
- Community Boundaries

**Park Name**

- Crocker Pond Recreation Area
- Hager Park
- High Ridge Wildlife Mgmt Area
- Leominster State Forest
- Muddy Pond Conservation Area
- Wachusett Mountain State Reservation

**Roadways**

- US & State Routes
- Other Roads

**Water**

- Streams & Rivers
- Intermittent Stream
- Lakes, Ponds & Reservoirs

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## SECTION 10 - REFERENCES

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The following sources were used in the preparation of this Plan:

- Town of Westminster Master Plan – 2000
- Town of Westminster Master Plan – 2014
- Town of Westminster Community Development Plan – 2004
- Previous Westminster Open Space & Recreation Plans (last iteration: 2014)
- Westminster Planned Production Affordable Housing Plan – 2018
- Westminster Economic Development Strategy – 2015
- Comprehensive Wastewater Management Plan CWMP - 2007
- Montachusett Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) – 2019
- Westminster Solid Waste Management Plan – 2001
- 1995 – 2020 Vision for the Nashua River Watershed – 1995
- Montachusett Regional Strategic Framework Plan – 2011
- MRPC Revised Buildout Calculations for Westminster – 2020
- Nashua River Watershed Five Year Action Plan 2003-2007
- DEP TMDL Report for the Nashua River Watershed – 2007
- DEP TMDL Report for the Chicopee River Watershed – 2006
- DEP TMDL Report for the Millers River Watershed – 2003
- 2016 DEP Water Quality Assessment Report for Massachusetts
- Town of Westminster Historic Preservation Plan of 1998
- Freedom’s Way Heritage Association: Westminster Reconnaissance Report - 2006

Information was also provided by such local sources as:

- Westminster Office of the Assessor
- Westminster Department of Public Works
- Westminster Conservation Commission
- Hager Park Commission
- Westminster Agricultural Commission
- Westminster Town Clerk
- Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee
- Westminster Parks and Recreation Commission
- Westminster Planning Board
- Westminster Board of Health
- Westminster Historic Commission

Various State of Massachusetts departmental websites: Department of Environmental Protection, Department of Conservation Resources, Department of Fish & Game – Division of Fisheries & Wildlife, Agricultural Resources, Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, Bio-Map, Living Waters, Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program, and others.

Various non-profit websites: The Nature Conservancy, American Farmland Trust, North County Land Trust, Mount Grace Land Trust, and MRPC.

All maps (with the exception of the Farms and Agricultural Soils map which was prepared by the North County Land Trust) and acreage calculations were performed by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) 2020.